

Asari Endou

Illustration by
Marui-no

16





Magical Girl Paisan Project

White

Asari Endou

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Marui-no



**PSHUKÉ
PRAINS**

Fights using
her magic
red air gun



RANYI

Can connect one
door to another



**DIKO
NARAKUNOIN**

Can momentarily
disappear



**PRINCESS
LIGHTNING**

Fights enemies with the
power of lightning



SALLY RAVEN

Can create crow
familiar



KUMI-KUMI

Can destroy
objects and re-
assemble them



MEPHIS PHELES

Her sweet words will
corrupt your heart



CAUKORO

Calculates and
rightness her
magic abacus



**TETTY
GOODGRIPP**

Can grab anything
with her magic
mittens



**RAPPY
TAYPE**

Can preserve
anything with her
magical tape



DRILL DORY

Can dig through
anything and
everything with her
magic drill



**CLASSICAL
LILLIAN**

Knit whatever
she pleases with
her magic knitting
machine



**THUNDER-GENERAL
ADELHEID**

Can reuse absorbed energy



MISS RIL

Can change her body
into different material



ARC ARLIE

The more hits she
takes, the stronger
she gets



KANA

Ask her a ques-
tion, and she'll
know the answer



**MAGICAL
GIRLS**



PRINCESS DELUGE

Fights enemies using the power of ice.



SNOW WHITE

Can hear the thoughts of those in need.



RIPPLE

Can throw shuriken that always hit their target.



BLADE BRENDA

The more cuts she makes, the sharper her blade gets.



**O LULU
(LOVE LULU)**

Releases the power hidden in stones.



**CANNON
CATHERINE**

Can fire as many shots as she likes.



PYTHIE FREDERICA

Can reflect whoever she wants in her crystal ball.



**OLD BLUE
(LAPIS LAZULINE THE FIRST)**

Her eyes can see the true nature of things.



**LAPIS
LAZULINE
THE THIRD**

Makes magical candies that can alter your feelings.

Magical Girl Raising Project

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Asari Endou

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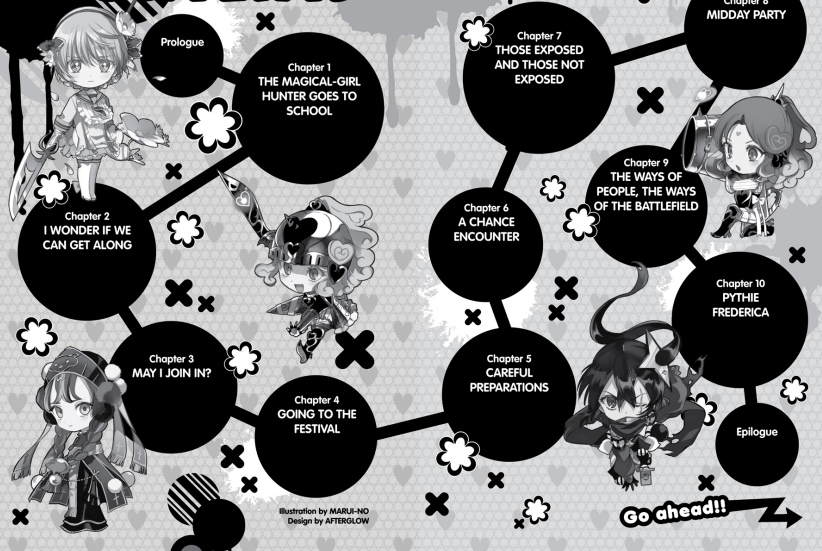
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PROLOGUE

In a prefab hut once used for road expansion work was a three-legged table crushed into the wall. There were countless marks from a sharp blade: on the floor, walls, and ceiling, followed by blood spatter.

The name General Pukin just about popped out of Frederica's mouth, but she reflexively pressed her lips firmly shut. Adding "General" on top of "Pukin" would be far too sentimental to say in front of her underlings.

This wasn't the time to be lingering on the past. They were in the present. Frederica shook off the feelings for Pukin that had welled up and turned her eyes to the scene before her.

A lot of people resented, hated, *loathed* Pythie Frederica. More than she could count on her fingers—tallying them all up would make a thick catalog.

But despite that, not many people would attack her allies.

They would have to know where Frederica was hiding right now as well as whose help she'd requested; they'd have to be strong enough to kill a capable mercenary, think nothing of human life, and be dispassionate about the act itself.

When Frederica had been told about the situation, the first to come to mind as a possible culprit—mastermind, rather—was Lapis Lazuline the First. But once she actually saw the scene for herself, a completely different person came to mind.

Squatting down, she poked at a slice in the floor. It was a wonderful cut, one that hadn't been made with brute force—the blade had been sharp, and there had been technique involved. Frederica wiped her hands with a handkerchief and exhaled.

"What do you think?" she called out, turning around. A magical girl tied up in chains, with dozens of talismans stuck all over them, wriggled like a worm. That wasn't who Frederica was talking to, of course. She'd been addressing the person standing to her right: the

magical girl Asmona, dressed like a painfully conspicuous boy detective from her red newsboy cap with white polka dots, framed glasses, and shorts with suspenders.

“Kimiera and the others must have fought here and lost. The methods used make me think that this is intentional, made out to be a terrible scene to teach us a lesson. I would hazard a guess that this is something of a warning. It’s like how the Mafia will pack stones into the mouths of the dead to make an example of them.”

She didn’t even glance at Frederica. Asmona spoke politely, but her tone was rough, giving full voice to her unspoken irritation: *“We pointlessly made more enemies because of your stupid behavior.”* Asmona scowled as she grabbed the brim of her hat with her right hand while she placed her left under the bridge of her glasses. Then she adjusted her hat and glasses at the same time and sighed in an incredibly deliberate manner.

That drew a sigh from Frederica as well. Some tension was fine, but this was a bit much. Normally, Frederica would have been acting a little sillier, but she wasn’t in the mood. The magical girl wrapped in chains and talismans between Frederica and Asmona stirred uncomfortably.

Frederica rubbed her chin in a show of contemplation. “Yes, certainly,” she said. “I do agree that there is a strong implication here that they’re calling attention to this. To leave not only signs of battle, but even the blood seems like a warning... Oh, it’s rather impressive of them to use Kimiera’s group.”

Ghost Transmigration Kimiera Kakuryo, whose hideout had been here, had been a graduate of the Archfiend Cram School, a magical-girl educational institution. In other words, she’d been strong. And coming with two equally strong companions just for a warning seemed like overkill.

A yellow mist gathered around Asmona, then abruptly dissipated. She was using a tablet that hadn’t been there moments earlier. She looked at the screen, then sighed again. “I’m not done collating the results, but there is the blood of three people here. Lulunam and Furuvara Botan, who were with Kimiera, are both unaccounted for, so that’s probably who it’s from.”

“What about enemy blood?” Frederica asked.

“There are signs that it was cleaned up.”

“To leave only Kimiera and the others’ blood makes it seem even more like they’re trying to show that off.”

This really felt like a warning, but Frederica thought that seemed rather strange. Killing Kimiera, Lulunam, and Botan was less an immediate warning and more a use of force. That must have taken quite a bit of time and effort.

The only one who could carry this out would be Lazuline the First. Or the Osk Faction, in particular the Lab. The principal of the magical-girl class was also not out of the question. *Aside from that...*, Frederica thought, mentally making a miscellaneous list lumping together any people who could be her enemy.

Hmm.

None of the candidates quite fit the bill, and they were all mismatched, not meshing with each other. Frederica was confused, too. The moment she'd witnessed the scene, she had imagined the face of a certain magical girl, and she just couldn't wipe away that impression. She knew that individual was no longer alive. What's more, Frederica had been directly involved in her death and had witnessed it personally using her magic. The girl's death had been vivid and incomparably cruel, her whole body bursting open—considering the girl's rampage up to that point, Frederica thought it had been a truly befitting death.

Pukin couldn't be the culprit—she was already dead. No dead person could have done this. That much was clear. But for some reason, she couldn't get Pukin out of her mind.

Frederica looked at the ground with just her right eye. Her right foot was tapping on the floor. It was an unconscious gesture. Anger, irritation, distrust, worry, and not just that—there was also some fear there. Even being an outlaw—no, precisely because she was an outlaw, fear was important. No matter how powerful your magic was, you had to be afraid of things that scared you, or you'd have no future.

She looked away from her feet and eyed the scene again. Those cuts were symbolic. It made sense that Pukin came to Frederica's mind; with her bare hands, Pukin had killed two magical girls of an antiestablishment faction who'd mocked her. But being caught up in this gave Frederica doubts. Pukin had actually been fearsome. Frederica never wanted to face her again. And she never would. In that sense, Frederica was acting like a small child frightened of a fictitious monster. This fear wasn't for the sake of self-preservation—frankly speaking, it was a disgrace.

Frederica understood this logically, but she still couldn't shake

the idea of Pukin being the culprit. Why was that? Was it out of fear?

Once upon a time, Frederica would have laughed off that fear without a care about her own future. The terror and fear that Pukin induced was part of her charm. She was incredibly exciting and addicting. If she truly had been alive, then Frederica would have been glad, thinking nothing could be more fun.

But Frederica was different now. There was something she wanted to do, no matter what. She couldn't afford to let a little fun with Pukin lead to her demise. Her stance toward fear had changed compared to the time when she had been a free outlaw, and maybe that was why she couldn't get Pukin out of her mind.

It had been confirmed that in the incident at the magical-girl class where the homunculi had gotten out of control, one of those homunculi had been modeled on Pukin. But was that enough to recreate this feeling like a hand clenching around Frederica's heart? It was also not impossible that some high-end homunculi that had yet to be disclosed could reproduce Pukin even more accurately.

The possibilities just kept growing. Frederica couldn't discard the things she should have thrown away. But this time, she wouldn't think lightly of her first impression. Sometimes a magical girl's hunch worked beyond logic. She would investigate thoroughly and conduct a magical inquiry, and if this was worth taking into consideration, then she would do that. That would be good enough.

"We should change plans." Asmona was facing her again.

Frederica nodded, posing like she'd been listening attentively the whole time. "Hmm?"

"The mercenaries aren't under control at all. Since they're all operating as they please, we're unable to track them, even after a situation like this happens."

"Indeed."

"It's a general issue of quality. Any magical girls hired by Pythie Frederica are either villains or bankrupt of character. That's why they do as they please. We should increase the routes by which they're hired."

Frederica looked over at Asmona and thought, *That's why I can only hire people like you.* Asmona met her gaze with a look that said, *"You're first on the list of villains and those bankrupt of character."*

Frederica nodded deeply.

"I believe that this time, we should recruit motivated personnel

with a sense of ethics,” Asmona continued, “using ideology, politics, or religion. At this rate, it will be a ragtag gathering, a disorderly mob.”

Asmona’s eyes were practically threatening Frederica: *“Do you get that? Because if you don’t, then I’m giving up on you and slapping you with my letter of resignation.”*

Fortunately, Frederica intuited Asmona’s intentions. This incident had clearly been caused by an information leak. To prevent that, they should gather personnel through different routes for some perfunctory reasons, then change the information they offered via each route before severing contact. That would make it easy to tell where the leak had originated in case something similar happened again. Asmona was implying, *“I don’t know where the leak came from, so just figure it out.”*

The fact that she’d taken all this into consideration was what made her a good subordinate. The problem was her assumption that Frederica would do all the work.

Frederica gave a little smile. The image of Pukin had yet to disappear from her mind, but it was better to smile than to fret about it.

CHAPTER 1

THE MAGICAL-GIRL HUNTER GOES TO SCHOOL

◇ Juube

The Magical Kingdom was supposedly spearheaded by the Sages, but they had the important issue of the magic power being about to dry up that they were dealing with, along with the foolish struggle between powers that was also not going away. Not only was there political strife between the large factions headed by the Three Sages, but even at a lower level, such as within factions and in certain departments, there were internal squabbles and struggles for power. Day in, day out, someone, somewhere was having a conflict.

And so those opportunists who would try flattering whichever group was slightly bigger would keep their eyes on the direction of these struggles, large and small. To them, currently, the hottest topic was the conflict between the Caspar Faction and the R&D Department. Even if they didn't publicly cross swords, those with sharp ears and eyes could tell what was going on based on the movements of people, money, and resources, and all the other various types of activity.

But very few knew the details of what the Caspar Faction and R&D were fighting over. It wasn't known that Pythie Frederica, who had taken over the Caspar Faction in a short period, and the figure known as Old Blue—the first-generation Lapis Lazuline, who had complete control over R&D—were in a secret feud over who would decide the future of the Magical Kingdom. But the two magical girls in Meeting Room 4 of the Magical Girl Resources Department, which was guarded to the gills by all sorts of security, were a little more versed in the affairs of their world than most of the well-

informed.

“Um, can I...?”

A magical girl with a puppet on her right hand raised that same hand—in other words, the puppet—and the puppet raised its hand just like the magical girl.

Juube, the silver-haired magical girl facing the whiteboard, did a half-turn on the spot and pointed her index and middle fingers at the puppet girl, Puppeta. “If you have a question, then go ahead.”

Being pointed at must have embarrassed Puppeta. She shrank away, but the puppet boldly opened its arms.

“Can’t Frederica and Lazuline make nice?” Puppeta asked.

“That’s impossible. Absolutely impossible. We’re ending that line of discussion here. Do you still have questions? If you don’t, we’ll move on... By the way, your puppet today is strangely cute.”

“There’s been a lot of activity with the magical-girl class, so I figured we can’t be too careful. I made contact with Rappy and made a puppet of her.”

“Not a bad precaution. And also, it’s cute.”

Juube smiled like you would at a child and petted the head of the puppet. The puppet waved its thin and transparent film, a magic wrap, in response. Puppeta was looking at her like she was gross, but Juube decided not to be bothered about it.

Juube wrote out some words on the whiteboard. Underneath Lazuline’s name, she wrote *R&D Department* in blue, and underneath *Frederica*, she wrote *Caspar Faction* in red.

“Typically, a single department could never fight with a large group commanded by one of the Three Sages. But it’s difficult to call R&D an ordinary department and also difficult to say that the Caspar Faction originally had much life in it... I suppose that goes without saying since Frederica has taken it over.”

Underneath *R&D Department*, she added *Clients*.

“A major part of the R&D Department’s expansion is that they’ve acquired multiple big-spending powerful aristocrats. They’ve formed a mutually beneficial cycle of accepting aid, pushing vigorously toward further research, and contributing their results to their sponsors. I’d say their operations are going even better than when we were there. But none of R&D’s clients are aware of what Lazuline the First is really after. R&D is researching the development of artificial magical girls; if their clients figure this out, they’ll realize this group isn’t good for the Magical Kingdom. I

think that would make R&D a legitimate resistance group within the Kingdom.”

Underneath *Frederica*, she added *Department of Diplomacy*.

“The Caspar Faction is throwing a lot of money around to gather mercenaries. Acting as an intermediary between them and the Archfiend Cram School graduates is the Department of Diplomacy. In a community with strong ties across the board, people will invite more people—people who just want money, people who want to enhance themselves, people who want to vent their violent impulses, people bound by obligation—all sorts. However, the upper limit of the Archfiend Cram School will certainly be outrageous. They have multiple legendary magical girls. That’s *if* they can hire people like that, though.”

Beside *Department of Diplomacy*, she added *Caspar Faction aristocrats*.

“We can’t expect much from this end—politically or violencewise. The Elite Guard aren’t bad, but their specialty is just being an honor guard, and they have no real combat experience.”

Juube listed out more. This time, she moved away from the two factions and wrote in black: *Information Bureau, the Lab, Puk Faction, and Inspection Department*.

“The Information Bureau will fundamentally not support either Lazuline the First or Frederica. Both of them are enemies to the mainstream Osk Faction.”

“*They won’t do it fundamentally, but will they do it practically?*” The puppet Rappy, unlike the original, was blunt, outspoken, and forthright.

And when Juube responded, her tone was different, too. “Yes, yes. You’re smart. If it seems like it will become a one-sided game, then the Information Bureau might support one of them to even their forces and make them clash with each other—since doing that would leave whoever remains standing greatly damaged. Well, I doubt this is going to happen, but you never know what they might get up to.”

“*There’s a lot of people who you never know what they might get up to, huh?*” the puppet asked.

Juube responded with an exaggerated nod and answered gently, as if speaking to a child. “That’s right. It really is a problem. The Lab was engaging in cooperative development with R&D before, but I can’t say they’re currently getting along well. Stuff happened.”

“Stuff, huh?”

“They seem busy right now, but one or both of them might cooperate. Though I think it would be a milder form of cooperation, such as offering some of their research results. The Puk Faction isn’t able to do that. Of course they can’t—not only did they empty all their safes, they even sold off all their art pieces to cause that incident, and because of that they’ve been made to pay indemnities. Faction operations have been greatly restricted, with either punitive confinement or being banished from their residences, and their fighting forces have been whittled down. I doubt either the First Lazuline or Frederica will be thinking they need to push themselves to make them allies.”

“What about the Inspection Department?”

“It’s comparatively easier to understand their behavioral principle. It’s to crack down on bad guys. That’s ultimately just superficial, while behind the scenes, well, they do rummage around. At the very least, their field inspectors have essentially no political advocacy, and in that sense they’re easy to associate with. But if you’re foolish enough to ask them for help, they’ll probably get suspicious of you over nothing, and Frederica definitely has reasons to be suspicious of you, while Lazuline the First probably does, too... I don’t think either will be wanting to make friends in Inspection... Which brings me to my main point.”

Juube smacked the whiteboard and turned to Puppeta, who was staring back at Juube like she found this a hassle. The puppet, meanwhile, spread its arms animatedly.

“You mean that us at Magical Girl Resources benefit from cooperating with either of them.”

“That’s right. And it would be a waste to watch and wait when we have this much information. If we can get on the winning horse, then we should. And...”

She wrote a little x over *Frederica*.

“We can’t work with Pythie Frederica after we were so desperate to kick her out of Magical Girl Resources. Our sponsors would get angry about it, too. She’s an eccentric, so maybe she would just say, ‘I don’t really mind, let’s call it water under the bridge,’ and let it go, but personally I would beg off helping out with the things that Frederica is trying to do. It’s definitely nothing good.”

“So then we help R&D?”

"It's better than helping Frederica. My background...and yours is R&D, but we were in public relations. We're barely even acquainted with Lazuline...that is, Old Blue from Internal Affairs. I kind of doubt that she'd consider our help as an old comrade reaching out."

"You don't sound all that enthusiastic about this."

"Well, you know. She's a nasty old hag."

She was merciless enough to sacrifice even her own, not just strangers. But she was affable and capable of getting a hold on your heart through just a few conversations, gaining her more and more devotees. Juube didn't think or speculate she had the sharpest intellect out there. She had no confidence at all that she could sit down at the negotiation table with Old Blue and not get sucked in. Even if she thought of herself as a collaborator, there would be no guarantee at all that was a fact. She'd be constantly dogged by the risk that she'd be used to do Old Blue's bidding and then thrown away.

"So then what'll you do?"

"That's my problem here. The various departments are all becoming very active in regard to the magical-girl class, so I think most likely something will happen in the near future."

"In the near future? So then won't they snatch the opportunity from under our noses if we don't act fast?"

"If that were all it was, we'd be fine. But if, for example, Frederica's side won and she greatly expanded her influence, she might well come to try to take over Magical Girl Resources again."

"I don't want that!"

"Neither do I. I think that to do something about the Magical Kingdom, it would be best for Magical Girl Resources to take the lead, but it seems we're the only ones who think that. I wish Old Blue and Frederica would just take each other down instead."

"That's too convenient to ever happen."

"Yeah, huh."

Juube and the puppet shared a smile. Puppeta sighed.

◇ Snow White

Background checks on related parties had begun before her infiltration of the magical-girl class. That investigation hadn't been

done by Snow White. The professionals of the Inspection Department had looked into them for her, under Mana's direction. This wasn't the kind of research that would result in deaths just from some probing—like the confidential matters of the Osk Faction or the Lab—but she had acquired many pieces of valuable information that weren't that easy to get.

Among that information was the history of the magical-girl class principal, Halna Midi Meren. She'd been assigned to the investigation team after the Cranberry incident came to light, had worked as senior staff on the scene, and had been highly praised for the extreme thoroughness of her work. Apparently, the more she investigated the incident, the stronger her desire to keep this from ever happening again had become. She'd even gotten teary-eyed over it.

That tracked with the class material that Arlie had brought her. They were only teaching things related to the Cranberry incident. Snow White was fully in agreement about preventing such an incident from ever happening again, but seeing such a bias in their study content made her wonder if "prevention of another Cranberry incident" was really all it was. Besides, the Magical Kingdom wasn't so soft that you could establish a magical-girl class on lip service alone.

The day that Snow White first joined the class, she'd faced Halna in the principal's office.

"Nice to meet you, Snow White. I'm Halna Midi Meren."

"Nice to meet you, Principal Halna."

Her hair was pulled back in a tight bun, her mage's robes crisp. Her eyes were fixed on Snow White from behind her glasses, while her pointed ears made you think of an elf from stories. She had a pretty face—but that may have made her seem cold.

Aside from the impression she got from her appearance, Snow White could also hear the voice of her heart. All the sadness she had known during her investigation of the incident that the Musician of the Forest had caused continued to linger in her heart, and she thought of it as her mission to get the magical-girl class on track and educate all magical girls to keep such a tragedy from ever occurring again. She felt pain every time magical girls caused a new incident.

And she was irritated at those who got in her way. That anger was directed at those who had sent their members into the magical-

girl class for the sake of expanding their faction and at those members who had been sent in. She felt adversely toward the presence of those girls and wanted them to get out right away. These were the things that troubled her.

Halna's lips relaxed slightly, and she sighed. Though Halna was just as expressionless as before, Snow White felt the principal had softened just a little.

"I have high hopes for you," Halna said.

Her manner of speech was, if anything, considerate toward Snow White. Halna wasn't hostile. Snow White had taken Musician of the Forest, Cranberry's, final exam, and publicly she was the one who had defeated Cranberry, so Halna figured she could be a major figurehead for the magical-girl class. She didn't want Snow White to leave.

Snow White had no intention of being their figurehead. There were too many things that she had to do, and she couldn't manage to deal with that on top of everything else. But if Halna was cooperative, then she was thankful. The problem only came if she wasn't actually cooperative—Snow White would have to watch out for that. Puk Puck had also been cooperative, speaking purely in terms of the voice of her heart.

There were three types of people willing to meet with Snow White, knowing what her magic was: those who didn't mind if she heard the voice of their heart, those who didn't want it heard but were forced to meet with her anyway, and those who had some way of preventing her from listening in.

She should assume that all high-ranking mages were people to watch out for. Snow White had believed in her own magic, and she'd thought highly of Puk Puck based on what she'd heard from her. But then she'd been used to do the Sage incarnation's bidding, magnified the damage, and increased the number of dead. She couldn't afford to repeat that mistake.

Bowing her head, Snow White left the room.

Halna's expression didn't change until the end. "I'll show you to the classroom," she offered.

The teacher—a magical girl named Calkoro—was smiling awkwardly.

Snow White could hear hammering nails from the direction of Umemizaki Junior High School. It seemed they had some kind of cultural event that they called the Founding Festival, and the

students were in a flurry of activity preparing for it. Even the sounds she was hearing were restless.

From the magical-girl class, what she heard mainly came from their hearts, and these were just as lively. There were voices loud and quiet—some wary of her, some frightened of her, and some concerned.

Now back in her civilian form, Koyuki Himekawa followed Calkoro to the classroom.

◇ Calkoro Culumff

Why was it one depressing thing after another? Calkoro's motivation had been at zero over the course of her short teaching career, so one thing would be enough to leave her fed up—but it wasn't just one thing.

One cause of her depression was the Magical-Girl Hunter, Snow White. Calkoro had assumed that she would be appointed as teacher and Calkoro would be relieved from duty, or even worse, Calkoro would be made to take responsibility for the incident with the homunculi and would be punished somehow—but fortunately, neither had happened, and Calkoro was to continue teaching. But that was a trial in its own way.

Snow White was in the textbook, after all. There was quite a lot of text and zeal devoted to her. How should Calkoro talk about Snow White in class? What was expected of her? Was she supposed to say with a smile, *“And so as you can see, Snow White is an amazing person. Okay, a round of applause, everyone,”* and make them clap? That would reek of propaganda. The more headstrong magical-girl students wouldn't accept that so readily. Even just thinking about that made her head hurt.

And then the second thing that was making her depressed was the special class that was starting that day. She would be teaching a module that wasn't in the textbook, out of a booklet she'd been given—this must have been a very last-minute change. The booklet was very thin, and there were too many areas left up to the teacher's discretion.

“A magically generated body operated by a quasi-personality also made by magic is known as a homunculus,” Calkoro explained. “We use the word *personality*, but this is something like an

operating program and is essentially different from the feelings and natures of real people.”

It wasn't like she didn't understand the logic of explaining to the class about homunculi, for the students who had been harmed by them. But Calkoro thought that if you were sincere about explaining these things, you should take a little more time on it. She wanted them to actually make a textbook, rather than leaving it to the discretion of the teacher. Then she could do this more easily.

“And as for similar types of magical servants, there are also golems, which you all know of.”

A sour air wafted through the room. All the students' faces were saying, “No, we don't know.” For this class, Calkoro was even having to fumble around when it came to shared knowledge. She cleared her throat quietly.

“Research into golem formulae for creating servants goes back to ancient times. Homunculus formulae are a derivation created in the modern era. As for how they differ, any competent researcher will say they vary a lot—homunculi use formulae of ‘fluid generation and fixation,’ so if you make a pure inorganic substance with no magical composition in the base, then it's a golem—they're also different in size and in how much they maintain a human form. At any rate, in the public space, most homunculi are called golems. Since there is a sort of issue of registered trademarks.”

She thought she incorporated some humor, but the students didn't even giggle. Calkoro quietly cleared her throat.

“Currently, the units that are mainly called homunculi are black, with a fluid composition. They are used in the defense of this magical-girl class, as well as used for our recreation time. Due to their sinister appearance, they are sometimes called demons, but this is slang and not an official designation.”

The homunculi that had caused the incident were prototype models carefully produced by the Lab, and so would be a little different from typical homunculi, but Calkoro didn't touch on that. She continued just as if that hadn't happened even though this emergency class was happening because of the homunculus incident. She probably had to take various parties into consideration.

“In recent years, we've developed the formulae to generate what are called artificial magical girls. This is a revolutionary technology that has become possible through separating the quasi-

personality from the base and enhancing its functionality. Since they resemble homunculi, they will sometimes be confused with them, but they're completely different."

Apparently, artificial magical girls had been highly confidential for a long time; Calkoro was not in a position to know anything highly confidential, and she had only heard about it through vague rumors—hearsay of the hearsay of the hearsay. But now that the Shufflin magical-girl model was in regular circulation among aristocrats, public institutions, and the very wealthy, it couldn't be called confidential.

But even so, no magical girls were going to learn this in class. It was valuable and important information. Calkoro looked over to see that Dory was abnormally fidgety and restless. Calkoro had heard Dory was affiliated with the Lab. She would surely understand the importance of this class. Mildly satisfied, Calkoro continued with the lesson.

◇ Drill Dory

Dory was far more mature than the other magical girls thought she was. Despite her dissatisfaction with what was being taught, she did nothing more than twist in her seat. She had enough discernment not to say something loudly and stand up or make a fuss or yell.

Calkoro's emergency class wasn't a problem for the first half. But once she got to the stage about artificial magical girls, it was nothing but problems. She explained artificial magical girls all as one category, but it was fair to say that absolutely everything about them was different, depending on the genre. It was totally absurd to say they were all artificial magical girls and that was it.

Most likely, the teacher was trying to talk about the Shufflin series. That was about all a mere teacher would have the opportunity to know. But Drill Dory had been created in the Lab, the highest and most unparalleled research institution that the Magical Kingdom could boast of. She couldn't stand having an antiquated old generation like a Shufflin being treated like a representative for artificial magical girls.

She also didn't like hearing people say that artificial magical girls resembled homunculi. That was too rude. The service life of a homunculus was short, at a few years, and what's more, they

basically had no intellect or ego. Even if the new models that had attacked them in the mountains that night were a little more like magical girls, they were still lacking in intellect and ego. They also had a major flaw: If you let them use unique magics, their service life would be shortened at an incredible rate. At the end of the day, they were consumable goods. And they smelled funny. Some units would even keep making that slopping sound, even when they were ordered to stay still. The way they would fall apart with a splatter when they were defeated wasn't very pretty, let alone how they moved. Everything about them was not good. It was outrageous to compare them to artificial magical girls, of whom it was no overstatement to say were the pinnacle of magical girls.

A number of experiments had been done in the past to attempt to fuse homunculi with magical girls. But Calkoro had heard that none of the subjects had lasted very long since their physical properties were closer to those of homunculi. The two groups weren't like oil and water—instead, homunculi and magical girls were just so compatible that you couldn't get the results you wanted.

The technologies of artificial magical girls and homunculi had been created to imitate the Sage incarnation system. The technology of transferring a soul to an incarnation to acquire an effectively limitless life span had been invented by the First Mage, but even now that was all a black box, and as of yet nobody aside from the Three Sages could replicate it.

But they were slowly approaching success—supposedly. Basically, artificial magical girls were the result of constant effort, overcoming many sacrifices and trial and error in order to get closer to the mysteries of magic. Homunculi, on the other hand, had more or less the same origin. These days, they were just a source of labor. There were no longer any technologists or researchers engaged with homunculi in pursuit of a Sage incarnation. Those would have been long gone, way before Dory had been born. The only people researching homunculi now were those interested in selling them. They only aimed to make them cheaper and more efficient, and just wanted to make a buck off them. They weren't aiming high.

Then there was another type of artificial magical girl: the Princess series, which had been developed in the R&D Department, with joint development done for a time at the Lab as well.

Apparently, several of the formulae they'd used had been the

same as with Dory's group. But since the trash at the R&D Department had walked away with the results, the Lab hadn't gained anything from them.

Dory basically saw them as enemies. But she still felt some natural hesitation about attacking Princess Lightning. It wasn't just that causing a squabble in the class would make a lot of trouble—Lightning was also kind of scary. However, Dory had made up her mind that if she ran into any other Princesses, then she'd stab them with her drill. That said, one of the Princesses had saved Dory's life when she'd been attacked in the mountains by homunculi, so she decided to forgive them.

And that wasn't the only reason. She'd heard that the Princesses were modeled from humans with no magical aptitude—so they could never beat Dory, who was modeled from a magical girl. They might stand a chance against an early model like Arlie, a unit who had also left the Lab early and hadn't upgraded her equipment, but a newer model like Dory was a completely different story. That's why, as a superior being, she so generously forgave them. This proved that Dory was particularly sensitive.

Calkoro's class skimmed briefly over artificial magical girls before delving into the history of the development of homunculi. It seemed that the most irritating part was over for now. Dory sighed, then she happened to notice Arlie looking at her with concern. That kind of made Dory mad, and she kicked Arlie in the shin at an angle no one else would see.

◇ **Tetty Goodgripp**

Tetty had known about the magical girl Snow White since before she had transferred in—because she was mentioned in their textbook. Her name had come up more than once or twice in their class. Tetty had memorized everything the textbook said about her: that she had started by beating the fearsome magical girl called the Musician of the Forest, Cranberry, and that even now she traveled all over the world to take down wicked magical girls and mages and other sorts of bad people.

And this Snow White had joined their class.

Of course, Tetty had never had a classmate with her name in their textbooks before. She'd never even heard of such a thing. It

was like a historical figure becoming a classmate. If you thought about Oda Nobunaga or Tokugawa Ieyasu joining your school, you could understand what a sensational event this was.

Of course, the school would bow their heads and say how glad they were to have her. It was like a private school with a strong sports team scouting for new talent. Even after joining the class, she would probably get special treatment.

Tetty was rather attached to her position as magical-girl class representative. There was a mercenary element. She figured that having this trophy would mean a bright future. She took pride in having been chosen from the rows of the elite in the class, and she was fond of all the events that she'd managed as the student rep—these various elements would only grow, increasing her attachment even further. But once Snow White had transferred in, Tetty had given up on being student rep. Snow White was an honor student. And she was in the textbook. Tetty would never say that she was a better student rep than Oda Nobunaga or Tokugawa Ieyasu.



And then ten days passed since Snow White had transferred in.

Contrary to what Tetty had been so sorrowfully prepared for, absolutely nothing came up about the position of student rep—in fact, Snow White wasn't named leader when she was put into Group One, so Tetty continued to occupy both roles as group leader and student rep.

Tetty was less relieved and more confused. Hadn't Snow White been invited as a leader for the next generation? Tetty considered that maybe it was expected that she step back of her own accord, but Calkoro didn't approach her. It didn't seem like the other students questioned the current situation, either, so she just kind of continued as the student rep.

There was no activity from Snow White's end. Of course, there was no direct violence, but also no verbal demands or indications of any intentions via her attitude. It seemed that she had no complaints about being neither student rep nor group leader.

Everything about Snow White was different from what Tetty imagined. She was sort of mature, with a calm attitude that made her seem less like a middle schooler and more like a high schooler.

She wasn't the vengeful warrior written of in the textbook—she was composed and, if anything, relaxed.

And she wasn't especially talented in terms of physical ability. She was a little below the middle of the class. Mephis had probably been expecting her to be as athletic as a legendary warrior; she seemed disappointed after their rec time.

Maybe her magic was special, but Tetty didn't quite understand how hearing the thoughts of people in trouble worked. She figured that basically, you just had to not be in trouble—except Tetty had a lot of worries in general; did that count as being in trouble? It was embarrassing for all her worries to be known, but Snow White didn't appear to be particularly bothered. Tetty felt too awkward to ask Snow White about this herself, so she decided things were fine like this.

Snow White didn't have any lofty ambitions, and she didn't look down on her classmates, either. At the very least, that's how it seemed to Tetty. She'd so rudely assumed that Snow White would be an intolerable honor student. Snow White was incredibly kind with Arc Arlie, who she'd already been acquainted with. She took care of her just like a mom, wiping her mouth during mealtimes, and when she fell during rec time, Snow White would immediately rush up to her and help her up. Gradually, Tetty grew less wary about this new classmate.

Within a few days of Snow White's transfer, Tetty, Miss Ril, and Rappy Taype were chatting with her like normal. Snow White also quickly became friendly with magical girls outside their group, like Mephis, Adelheid, and Sally. Dory was the one person who wouldn't quite open up. Seeing her clear wariness toward Snow White as well, Tetty found it a little baffling that this was Snow White's first meeting with Dory when she was friends with her sister, Arlie—but now Arlie was joining in, as they were close enough to chatter and laugh about things.

Yes, she came off like a nice girl. She would smile, scratch her head with an awkward look, make jokes, and bow her head to say thank you; she was a normal classmate in every way, with nothing nasty about her. Snow White was sort of like an upgraded version of Matsutani, a student who had transferred into Tetty's class in the third grade.

It wasn't that Tetty didn't feel positively toward Snow White. But she was also observing her coolly. The possibility that she had

come to steal the seat of student rep was not zero. That's exactly why she thought Snow White was a good girl, but at the same time, she also wondered, *Maybe she's a little too good?*

It wasn't just Snow White herself—the things in the textbook were pretty unrealistic and were written more like a story than actual history. You could even call it mythological. It wasn't as if all accounts of Snow White were correct. But at the same time, you also couldn't say for sure that all of it was a pack of lies. What if Snow White was actually cruel and merciless, but she just kept that hidden?



In retrospect, Tetty figured that even Matsutani from the third grade had done something similar to get by in the world. She'd put on a kind of act to fit in well with a new environment.

What was Snow White trying to do? Was she really nothing more than just a transfer student? The more Tetty thought about it, the further she got from any conclusions, and since she was such a good girl, thinking about how she couldn't stop focusing on this made her feel horribly guilty. It would be unbearable if this counted as being "in trouble" and Snow White read her mind.

Tetty hadn't been aimlessly going to school over these past few months. Even outside of class, she had learned and grown. When you couldn't understand something, you should just ask someone who seemed like they did know.



"Oh, Snow White."

Satou, who was in the courtyard weeding grass, nodded without any kind of grimace. "She's affiliated with the Inspection Department."

"The Inspection Department?"

"They deal with wrongdoing by magical girls... In other words, I suppose they're something like police officers."

"I see," Tetty replied as she pulled out some weeds. Long, long roots that seemed like they would need a hoe or spade slowly came out of the ground, and she tossed them into the steel bucket behind her. Grabbing a second weed, she asked Satou, "Which means... someone is getting investigated by the police?"

The very first person who came to her mind was Kana, who had just been released from prison.

But Satou smiled and shook her head. "No, no, I don't think that's what it is. You know there was an incident before, right? The one where tons of homunculi showed up. I think Inspection is more worried about that."

Satou was probably someone well-informed within the Information Bureau. The mage was privy to a bunch of information that a simple janitor couldn't know, and when Tetty asked, she

would tell her about it. If Satou said so, then it was fair to see it as pretty trustworthy information.

Tetty nodded. "I see. So she came to investigate the cause of the incident... But if that's what it is, then shouldn't they just do a normal investigation? Would she need to bother joining the class as a student?"

"I think maybe Inspection is interested in things—enough that they want to send in an inspector, rather than do a normal investigation...although I think it's good that people like that are passionate about their work. If there's no problem, then there's no problem, and it's obviously best for them to come to that conclusion for us. It would also be good for them to figure out how to prevent further incidents."

From the way Satou was talking, Tetty understood that it had been "just an accident," and she was privately relieved. That had been the first time in her life she'd ever experienced anything so terrifying. She never wanted something like that to happen again, so even the words "prevention of further incidents" reassured her a bit.

Satou looked up at the sky and slapped her leg. She then took up the towel hung on her belt and wiped the sweat off her forehead; a few pale hairs from the mage's bangs were stuck to it with sweat. A beat later, the mage seemed to have realized something. "Ah," she said, hurriedly turning back to Tetty. "Sorry, sorry! Look at me, babbling on about the incident when it must have been so frightening for you."

"Oh, no, that's fine."

"Goodness, that was thoughtless of me. I should reflect on that." Satou wore a guilty expression as she rubbed her face with her towel before putting it back on her belt.

Tetty was aware that if anyone was going to be feeling bad, it should be herself. She waved her hands in front of her face. "No, I was the one doing all the babbling, Mr. Sat—," she started to say, then hurried and shut her lips. "Mr. Satou" had just about popped out of her mouth. If Tetty let slip that she had been calling the mage a nickname she made up in her head, apologies wouldn't cut it.

Satou stared curiously at Tetty. "Sat...?"

"Uh, no, never mind, it's nothing. I was just saying...I shouldn't have sat down with you and started babbling like this."

“That’s quite the exaggeration.” Satou’s shoulders shook with laughter. “I thought for sure that you’d given me a nickname and been calling me that in your head.”

Tetty almost choked but somehow stopped before it got to her throat, and she flashed a dismissive smile.

“You started off with ‘Sat,’ so I thought you were calling me *Saturn*.”

The image of Saturn devouring his own child with a terrifying expression rose in her mind, and now Tetty did choke. After a few coughs, she somehow calmed down. “Please, I would never call you something like that.”

“Ha-ha-ha, goodness. Silly me.”

Tetty wondered just how much better of a comparison it would be if she said she’d been calling the mage Satou because the janitor had a similar air and personality to the old man Mr. Satou Tetty used to know. But she dismissed that idea, figuring now wasn’t the time to be thinking about such things. She should change the topic to a higher priority subject.

“But, um, you know. If Snow White has come to the magical-girl class to investigate the incident, does that mean that once she’s done investigating, she’ll transfer out again?”

“Hmm, I don’t know about that. Snow White is the absolute greatest magical girl we could get as a class emblem, and I’m sure the higher-ups won’t want her to quit. She’s still young, and it would certainly be worthwhile for her to study and graduate from here, so I hope she continues while also being an investigator.”

◇ Classical Lillian

Group Two gathered behind the school building early just about every morning, all of them in magical-girl form, to have a meeting. At this time of day, the school clubs would be having morning practice. Depending on how they were feeling and how much they’d slept, some of Group Two seemed like they’d fall over any minute, or had their heads swaying back and forth, or came in with bedhead. It was concerning, even if you’d look decent once you transformed. When things were really bad, sometimes they’d even come late, and Mephis, who dealt with Kana’s barrage of questions about how to read manga or demands that she wanted to read

more, was sometimes absent.

Lillian was the only one who had never been absent or late. Without Lillian's magic, the group couldn't put up the area detection net. Magical girls' senses were sharp, but any spies would also be magical girls, so this was a risky situation. Lillian's daily routine was to wake up before the other members and string her yarn around the school building and the asphalt and such. Once she was done, she would welcome the other members of the group.

Since Lillian was the only one doing this in addition to regular activities, she bore a greater burden than the other members. But Lillian wouldn't say that out loud. If she whined and complained like Pshuke, someone might take notice of her for the moment, but it would always make them like her less. Lillian wasn't going to make things difficult in Group Two and demand that conditions improve. There was nowhere else for her to go, so she wanted to make things as comfortable as possible for herself.

Lillian didn't think that she could become someone's number one. Obviously that was out of the question in human form, but even as a magical girl, it was unlikely. She hadn't even managed to become number one to herself. She thought of herself as a magical girl who couldn't be a protagonist. Magical girls were all amazing, but there were different levels of amazing. Lillian couldn't even get top billing in the tiny community that was Group Two, so she'd generally play a small part or at most a supporting role. Actually, it was close to a miracle that she'd entered the magical-girl class. There were plenty of magical girls in the Elite Guard who were more capable, or brighter and more beautiful. She'd been chosen just because she was in the right age range. If that wasn't a miracle, then what was?

It wasn't like she was pessimistic or contrary. She was just comparing herself and the world with an objective eye, and based on that was living a constructive life with what seemed like optimal methods. Even if she couldn't become someone's number one, even if she couldn't become the sole protagonist, she could be needed. A supporting role had their own way of being useful. The phrase "unsung hero" had such a nice ring to it. That was what she ought to aspire to.

And so Lillian went through her routine every single day. Never slacking off and never cutting corners, whether there was rain or wind, Lillian strung up her yarn. On the rare occasions when her

group members voiced their thanks, she was happy. That made her feel needed, and it nourished her.

Ten days after Snow White had transferred into the magical-girl class, Lillian started arriving at school a full fifteen minutes early. You couldn't let your guard down for a second with the Magical-Girl Hunter Snow White. It would be dangerous if Lillian didn't extend the range of her knitting even farther. Snow White didn't typically seem like the sort of magical girl who would listen in, but it wasn't safe to make that judgment after just ten days. This was the Magical-Girl Hunter—it would be nothing for her to give off the sort of impression that would deceive someone like Lillian.

After arriving at the school through the gate, she put a hand to her waist and stretched her back, bending her upper body to the right, to the left, backward, then forward, and then she got started. The topic of discussion that day would probably be Snow White. Since it wouldn't do to be overheard by the very one they were talking about, naturally, Lillian's once-over would be thorough.

She focused particularly on the back of the school building, where the group met up; from there, she leaped onto the roof and strung up her yarn. Since she was on the left and could be seen from the Umemizaki main school building grounds, she whizzed around quickly to string up her yarn, climbing up onto the roofs again to go to the right side of the school building next, then came down on the side where she was hidden from Umemizaki. With a lot of trees and shrubs here, you couldn't see in from the outside, so the area would be vital for concealing yourself. Lillian strung up her yarn assiduously.

She camouflaged her yarn so it couldn't be seen by putting dirt over it and hiding it with leaves. Then, as she lifted her head to move on to the next task, Lillian sniffed. A scent reminiscent of sweet fruit tickled her nose.

She narrowed one eye. The scent was thick. This was too close for it to be some sports team out on the field having brought in an assortment of fruits to refuel. It was right there. But you wouldn't be smelling fruit around here. Just what on earth did this mean?

She sniffed again. The smell was stronger. She looked around the area, but there was nothing that looked like it. Lillian cautiously took one step after another. It was fragrant. She felt like she could drown in the scent. She took three steps, four steps from there, five steps, and on the sixth step, she stopped.

She hadn't even noticed the color. A flow of air dyed a pale pink was swirling around. It was just as thick as fog. She couldn't see even one step ahead.

This was supposed to be morning at school. She didn't know where she was now. Something was going on. Lillian covered her mouth and nose with her sleeve. There was more to this smell than it seemed. She had been lured here. She shouldn't have proceeded any farther—she should have turned back immediately. But it wasn't too late for her yet.

She reeled back the yarn she held in her right hand, gradually aiming for her original position bit by bit. First, she had to get out of here. She reeled back bit by bit, and then there was a sudden movement of the air. The air swirling around her shifted, and a hand flew out from within the pale-pink mist, grabbing Lillian by the shoulders and drawing her in with fearsome strength.

“There we go.”

She had strung up more of her yarn than usual. Now no one would be able to eavesdrop. Lillian checked her magical phone. Seeing it was just about time to meet up, she tilted her head. She could have sworn she'd had more time, but for some reason, she'd only just barely made it on schedule. Upon further consideration, she thought that maybe she overdid it a little bit. She then leaped down from the roof to the group's meeting spot.

CHAPTER 2

I WONDER IF WE CAN GET ALONG

◇ Kumi-Kumi

It was before homeroom, around the time of day when you could hear the various school clubs having morning practice out on the sports field.

Group Two was in their magical-girl forms, taking up their usual positions—sitting on the steps, leaning against the wall, or squatting by the edge of the gutter. Classical Lillian had strung her magic yarn around them to make sure that nobody got close enough to eavesdrop on their secret talk.

Mephis, who was squatting with her legs spread, cleared her throat and started the conversation.

“We have two items on the agenda today.”

“First time I’ve heard anyone say ‘agenda.’ Was this some kind of formal meeting?” Thunder-General Adelheid asked, adjusting the brim of her military cap.

Refusing to comment on that question—teasing, rather—the leader of Group Two, Mephis Pheles, continued apathetically. “First: Kana. What do we do about her?”

“What...do you mean...?” said Kumi-Kumi.

“I mean whether it’s okay to invite her to this group. It’s a pain in the ass to always be like, *‘I’m going, but don’t follow me,’* and leave her behind.”

“But...still...”

“I know, okay. It’s not *just* ‘cause it’s a pain. I’m saying, wouldn’t it be good for her to join in on sharing information with us? The one to let her out of prison was our boss, right? So then she counts as one of us.”

Kumi-Kumi considered captain of the Elite Guard an

unreachably high rank, and even higher above that was the suspicious magical girl in the Caspar Faction's upper echelon, Pythie Frederica. After barging in unannounced, Frederica had advised Kumi-Kumi of many things. A lot of the information she had brought had surprised Kumi-Kumi. Given how suspicious Frederica was, Kumi-Kumi had gone to check things with her senior just in case, and she had said that the prison was also in their faction's jurisdiction and that she'd seen someone there who seemed to be Frederica. And so Kumi-Kumi figured that this information was passably accurate.

"Ah suppose," said Adelheid. "It's not like Ah can't understand that. But this is about yer self-interest, too, Mephis."

"Whaddaya mean, self-interest?" Mephis shot back.

"Ya cain't be leavin' Kana behind every mornin' for this meetin'. It's pretty emotionally exhaustin' to come ta school from the same house and then tell her to wait awhile, ain't it?"

"Well, yeah, but..."

"Ah don't think it's a great idea to bring Kana just ta avoid stress."

"I'm not bringing this up just 'cause of my stress. Look, it's like—Kana helped out a lot during the whole kerfuffle that happened before, right? She helped you, too, right, Kumi-Kumi?"

Kumi-Kumi nodded. She meant to nod as heavily as possible. All on her own, Kana had defeated a homunculus with a really crazy ability to turn whatever it touched to dust, and furthermore, when Kumi-Kumi had been just about caught, Kana had risked her life for her. So it would be rather unreasonable to say not to trust her.

Kumi-Kumi personally felt that it would be fine to go call Kana here right away, but it seemed Adelheid wasn't enthusiastic about the idea, and she folded her arms with a complicated expression. "Ah think it's great ta be strong. But that also means she can be dangerous."

"What do you mean?"

"She's strong, and she was in prison. She's gotta be dangerous."

"Hmm," Classical Lillian muttered and touched her fingers to her chin. "I've heard she had her memories tampered with in prison. Kana can be a little odd, but she seems like a good magical girl. Let's say she did something awful in the past; if she lost her memories of that time and her personality has changed, then

doesn't that basically mean that she's a different person now?"

Kumi-Kumi nodded in complete agreement. But Adelheid still appeared indecisive; her lips were pouty.

"Ah cain't complain about callin' Kana a good girl now. But y'know, it ain't jus' that she was dangerous before prison. The people usin' her are dangerous. Why was she allowed in this school? Basically, it's 'cause those people figured they had a use for her here."

Adelheid was putting it indirectly, but after some consideration, Kumi-Kumi got what she meant. And she also considered what she should do.

"What if...I go...ask about...that...?"

"Ah, that's an idea. But is it okay for ya to be askin' that stuff?"

"If it's not...they'll just...tell me no..."

Everything Frederica had told her could also be shared with her friends, and Kumi-Kumi was allowed to ask her questions. Frederica's goals were opaque and suspicious, but at the very least, right now Kumi-Kumi was glad to have her.

Mephis snorted. "Why Kumi-Kumi of all people? The higher-ups should know that the leader of this group is the great Mephis Pheles."

"I would assume they're wary of your magic, Mephis. If you met up and talked with them, that might trigger your magic without them realizing. Your magic is particularly fearsome when it comes to conversation."

Lillian's immediate flattery soothed Mephis's mood a little, and she let it go and said, "Well, can't do anything about that." Kumi-Kumi didn't know either why Frederica had come to her, but looking at the others, she was forced to think it was because she seemed like she was the easiest to handle.

"So, that's one item down," said Mephis. "The second item on the agenda is the Magical-Girl Hunter."

"I never even imagined that Snow White would transfer in," Lillian commented.

"Just what...is her goal...?"

"She's with the Inspection Department. She must be tryin' to investigate somethin'."

"There was that whole mess with the homunculi—maybe that was it?" Mephis suggested.

"It's possible...she has her eye on us..."

“That sounds accurate. I don’t like it,” said Lillian.

The Caspar Faction’s goal was to secretly investigate what was going on with the ruins underneath the school where the magical-girl class took place, and if possible collect a relic hidden there. Kumi-Kumi’s group members belonged to the Caspar Faction’s Elite Guard, so that was their goal as well. Of course, this was illegal, and if they were found out, they would be caught.

On that point, Kumi-Kumi did feel that some of them were more enthusiastic about it than others. Kumi-Kumi figured that if it looked like they would be found out, then they wouldn’t push it. If they just reported what they knew and said they had no chance to get the artifact, they could use that as an excuse and then graduate normally. But it seemed like Adelheid and Mephis took it a lot more seriously.

“I hear she can read minds, but from talking with her, it doesn’t seem like her magic is a big deal,” said Mephis. “Kana’s magic might even be more dangerous.”

“It doesn’t seem that she can hear absolutely everything...,” Lillian agreed.

“She could be...watching and waiting...until we have a... concrete plan...”

“If that’s what was going on, I think she’d already have arrested us.”

“Inspection ain’t the Caspar Faction, after all. In any case, we should be aware that she’s got an eye on us.”

“You don’t think she’s got an eye on the others?” Mephis asked Adelheid.

“That’s totally possible. Inspection has to work pretty independently, or they wouldn’t be able to do what they do. And Ah’ve been hearin’ fishy stuff about Tetty’s Information Bureau, Dory’s Lab, and Rappy’s Magical Girl Resources.”

“What about Group Three?”

“She’ll have her eye on them just as much as on us.”

The Research and Development Department was the greatest rival of the Caspar Faction—in other words, of the Elite Guard. So basically, their greatest rival was Princess Lightning, who’d received a recommendation from the R&D Department. Kumi-Kumi had also heard from Frederica that Ranyi and Diko Narakunoin were essentially friends of the R&D Department. That made them enemies of Kumi-Kumi and her group.

"I wish she'd just arrest Group Three." Mephis sighed.

"Ya cain't be gettin' yer hopes up like that. We don't really understand Snow White's magic—we need to work that stuff out carefully, or ya never know when we'll get burned."

"That's true, and then there's how she is in a fight. Actually, she's totally not as strong as I thought. Since they call her the Magical-Girl Hunter, I had my hopes up, but I was disappointed, honestly."

"The textbook...exaggerates things..."

"The textbook is so focused on how frightening Cranberry was, after all," said Lillian. "I'm sure they can't go writing that Snow White wasn't a big deal, as the one who defeated Cranberry."

"But it's real common for someone ta hide their real ability. Ya cain't let yer guard down."

"Can't let your guard down?" Mephis repeated in a more mocking tone. She snorted. "Adelheid, you were chatting away with her like nobody's business. And then you were holding your stomach and laughing. You weren't guarding jack shit. You were buddy-buddy with her."

"That ain't what was goin' on." Adelheid aggressively waved her hand in front of her face and then shook her head. "Any graduate of the Archfiend Cram School would jump on a story of Marika Fukuroi's blunders."

"Who cares about those kinds of in-group stories?"

"I think her being able to bring up those sorts of in-group stories may be exactly what we should be watching out for," said Lillian. "Since it means she's looked into your background, Adelheid."

"Ah, that's hard ta say. She may've just based that off mah name. And Ah feel like Ah mighta heard before that Marika Fukuroi and the Magical-Girl Hunter were on friendly terms, or maybe not."

"You're being way too careless—"

"Hey, you were chattin' away with 'er, too, Mephis. During the rec time the other day."

"Look, that was just idle talk—Snow White was reading the same manga that I'd been talking about with Kana during the break. It wasn't like I enjoyed chatting with her or anything."

"From where Ah was standin', ya seemed to be enjoyin' yerself."

"Well yeah, 'cause I was talking about a manga I like. When I

recommended it to you, you said you're not into delinquent manga, and you wouldn't read it."

There was no point in letting them continue this fruitless exchange forever. As Kumi-Kumi pondered a good way to turn this discussion around, the bell that came five minutes before the start of class cut off their pseudo-meeting. Without the time to come up with a plan to deal with the Magical-Girl Hunter, Group Two undid their transformations and ran to the classroom.

◇ Kana

The four members of Group Two—except for Kana—headed to their morning strategy meeting. Kana had to stay behind alone in the classroom, keep watch to see if anything different from usual happened before class started, and report back to them. This was normally an important job that would never be left to a newbie like Kana, so this had to mean the rest of her group trusted Kana just that much. Kana had contributed modestly enough during the homunculi incident, although she still made quite the blunder and almost died—but maybe her group members interpreted things more positively, like she'd risked her life to help a classmate.

If that was the case—no, even if that wasn't the case at all, she couldn't betray their trust. Kana had to focus every iota of concentration on observing the classroom.

When Group One gathered to talk, Kana perked up her ears to listen; when Group Three was saying hello, Kana casually joined in and said hello as well—but even while she was acting as usual, her eyes were sharply checking around the whole classroom, investigating for anything strange.

She did one round, and Group Three felt vaguely off to her, so she walked over there. Princess Lightning was arguing emphatically that based on the rotation, deep-fried bread was bound to show up for the school lunch that day. Kana was standing behind her and nodding. She then surveyed Group Three once more.

She hadn't been observing them every day for nothing. She immediately discovered what made her feel that something was off. It was Diko Narakunoin. Her unique hairstyle, with part of it sticking up—it was called a Mohawk, which she'd seen a number of times in Mephis's manga—was even spikier than normal. To use

Mephis's words, she was "kicking it up a notch" today.

"Diko," Kana called out despite herself.

Diko looked toward her, as did the rest of Group Three. Lightning cut off the conversation, looking at Kana as if to ask, *"How long have you been there?"*

Kana briefly mulled over how to describe Diko in that moment before settling on: "It looks like something good happened."

Diko opened her mouth slightly, closed it, wrinkled the bridge of her nose, and then opened her mouth again to say "Oh." She looked up to the ceiling before turning back to Kana with a serious expression. "Ranyi's going to be discharged from the hospital."

Sally made a surprised "Huh?"; Lightning broke into a smile, saying "Really?"; and Pshuke smacked Diko's back. "You should've told us that sooner!" she said. Group One noticed the fuss and approached, then joined in the celebration. Kana was glad, too. But she was still observing. Even after hearing some unexpected good news, she couldn't let her guard down. The mission levied on Mephis and the others was just that serious.

And then she noticed: There was someone who was a little outside of the ring of people—smiling, but not trying to join the conversation, and just standing there. It was Snow White.

Now that she thought of it, Ranyi had been in the hospital when Snow White had transferred in. In other words, she wouldn't really be a classmate to Snow White so much as a complete stranger. Of course, she would seem different from those who had fought with her in the same incident.

Kana was about to finish her observation of Snow White when their eyes met. Snow White looked intently at Kana, and Kana looked back at Snow White.

Kana passed by Arlie and Dory, who were chattering away loudly, and went to stand beside Snow White. The transfer student was the one Kana should be paying most attention to, but now that she thought of it, she couldn't recall talking to her very much. Snow White conversed with the other students a fair amount, and occasionally laughed or made them laugh, but Kana realized now that Snow White had never spoken to her.

She considered why and came to an answer.

"The Magical-Girl Hunter," she said out loud.

She sensed Snow White stirring beside her. "That's just a title other people gave me."

“That means you’ve done enough to be called that.”

“Well...”

“That’s not an accusation. I think it’s great to get rid of villains.”

Kana believed there were no real villains in their class. Granted, she didn’t remember anything about herself before she went to prison and had her memories manipulated. The odds were good that she’d been bad enough that Snow White would get rid of her. And since Yoshioka had been the one to let Kana out of prison, Kana couldn’t help but feel that had to be evil.

Kana was probably the reason Snow White had transferred in.

She gazed intently at Snow White, imploring her: “*If I’m evil, I’d like you to defeat me without hesitation.*” But Snow White just tilted her head, confused.

◇ Sally Raven

Sally took Pshuke to a cafeteria in the neighborhood like always, but that day they sat in a booth at the rear. The terrace seating was out of the question—she wanted to avoid standing out as much as possible and pick a place away from prying eyes, somewhere their voices wouldn’t travel.

“If that’s what you’re thinking, then we should’ve gotten a karaoke room,” said Pshuke.

“But then we would’ve had to sing,” Sally replied. “I did want you to hear my *Cutie Healer* medley, but let’s leave that for another occasion, yeahhh?”

Pshuke muttered something as she pulled out three Blu-rays from her school-issued bag; Sally pulled out three different Blu-rays, which she exchanged with Pshuke.

“Man, the series has really progressed, yeahhh?” said Sally.

“It’s crazy to think that it’s still got a long way to go.”

“I honestly envy you. There’s so much of the show that you haven’t seen yet.”

“Did you invite me here to talk about that?”

“Of course not... Snow White transferred into our class, right?”

Pshuke nodded, her expression bitter as she grumbled. “So annoying... Ridiculous... Can’t stand that girl...”

“You really hate her, huh? So as a freelancer, you wouldn’t

want to deal with her, after all?”

“Of course not. All freelancers have guilty consciences to some extent. I can’t have her snooping on us. Frankly, it’s bad enough that I even considered leaving school for a while...”

“Oh, don’t do that. I’d be sooo lonely.”

Pshuke clicked her tongue, swiped her cup of tea, and gulped it down aggressively. Then once the cup was empty, she smacked it down on the saucer. Sally figured Pshuke was trying to hide her embarrassment.

“Though I’d like to ask you, being a freelancer with that kind of history, Pshuke. How much do you know about Snow White?”

Pshuke picked up her knife and cut a vertical line down her pancakes. She glared up at Sally with the slightest grin on her lips. “Doesn’t the PR Department have its own dirt that they don’t want outsiders knowing?”

“Please, I’m just a peon, so I haven’t heard any dirt yet. But I can’t quite say that there’s absolutely none of that in the PR Department, yeahhh. The Magical-Girl Hunter, Snow White, is famous enough to be in the textbook, so you want what info you can get, right?”

“It’s not like I know much... Just some hearsay.” Pshuke poked at her pancakes as she nodded along, listening. She called it hearsay, but it seemed to her at the very least like a more realistic episode than the sort of heroic tales that were in the textbook.

Sally twirled her pasta around her fork and stabbed a cherry tomato, bringing it all into her mouth. “Basically just that she’s real tough on bad guys, yeahhh. But she comes off pretty different from that.”

“That could be a pretense.”

“Maybe, yeahhh. I’m sure that the stronger they are, the more they’ll typically try to hide it.”

“Well, either way...” Pshuke mopped up the syrup on her plate with a piece of pancake.

Seeing that pancake soaked with so much syrup, Sally felt a little regretful. *Maybe I should’ve gotten that*, she thought.

“It’s probably not us she’s after,” said Pshuke.

“You think?”

“I did some investigating into things.”

“Huh? So that’s what you were up to, yeahhh?”

“I’ve been asking people in the know and doing some

investigation around the school building for a while... And, like, there's more suspicious people in our class."

There was Kana, a former prisoner; Ranyi and Diko, who were sneaking around in various ways; and Lightning—who knew what she was thinking? Their class had plenty of suspicious students.

"I haven't even seen the principal," said Pshuke. "That's real suspicious. They're from the Information Bureau, right? Definitely dangerous."

"Is the Information Bureau that bad?"

"It totally is."

"If the principal is her target, then we might wind up without a class, yeahhh."

"Well, if that happens, then it happens, and we just have to give up. We can hold our farewell party and have some fun talking smack about the principal."

That remark was so Pshuke that Sally couldn't stop herself from laughing. When Pshuke started sulking, Sally held up her hands and pacified her with a "Hey, c'mon." She wasn't trying to mock Pshuke. "I was just thinking that you've really considered things, yeahhh. It seemed like you had a lot on your mind, so I was worried."

"What? I'm the same as always."

"Well, the way you put in your hairpin was a little messy. Plus, your lips were kind of glossy from lip balm, so I figured your lips must've been super chapped."

Pshuke snorted, then twirled her fork before setting it on her plate. "You've been watching me."

"I mean, yeahhh."

"Your powers of observation are creepy." Pshuke rattled off several curse words as if she was casting a hex.

Sally was privately relieved. If this was how Pshuke was acting, then there was no need to worry.

◇ Ranyi

Ranyi's emotions were a twisty mess up until she was set to be discharged from the hospital. Adding "twisty" to "mess" wasn't usually apt, but this was not the usual sort of mess—it was a twisty mess.

She was ashamed of herself for being the only one to wind up in the hospital and relieved that the other magical girls were safe, but then she reconsidered, since she didn't have to be relieved about the other groups, so she was relieved that her group members were safe, and then she got worked up over the report from Diko that the Magical-Girl Hunter, Snow White, had transferred to their class, and she repeatedly reread the letter from her master that had been sent to her with some well-wishing fruits—the letter was from Lazuline the First, now called Old Blue. In beautiful characters that were gladdening just to read, the letter showed concern about Ranyi and happiness that she was all right, while also apologizing, saying she would have to return to the field right away.

But Ranyi's happiness didn't go on forever. Even after reading the letter—rather, the further she read it, the more her panic revealed itself. Ranyi had to return to the class, or Group Three would be short one fighter, and the forces her teacher had sent in would be one short.

As she was anxiously impatient and feeling she had to get back right away, one day, two days passed, and finally, the day before she was to be discharged, she got a visit. It was not her master. It was Diko plus one. Diko made daily visits, and it wasn't unusual for her to come talk about what had happened that day, but her companion was quite unexpected. It was Princess Lightning.

She strolled right into the hospital room behind Diko as if it were nothing, smiling and saying, "It's been a while." That smile lifted Ranyi's spirits and immersed her in feelings of happiness. But that was immediately replaced by confusion. This hospital was owned by Ranyi's and Diko's backer, the R&D Department, and Ranyi had made up some reasons to refuse visits from any classmates aside from Diko.

But for some reason, Princess Lightning was there in her school uniform.

Ranyi saw Diko. She stood there boldly and without diffidence, her face expressionless as usual. It didn't feel like she had been forced into this by Lightning being really pushy. Diko was the type to make a firm refusal to begin with—even with Lightning.

"No need to look so bewildered," said Lightning.

Ranyi realized she'd failed to hide her feelings. She put a hand to her mouth and coughed deliberately a few times.

With a gesture as elegant as the statue of some kind of goddess

in an art textbook, Lightning held up the white box in her right hand, then placed it down on the table and opened it. The box was packed with twelve jars—of pudding. Lightning immediately pulled out one and opened a folding chair with another elegant gesture. She took a seat, removed the pudding jar lid, grabbed a plastic spoon, and then scooped out some pudding and brought it to her mouth. Every one of her gestures brought a smile to Ranyi's face.

"I've already talked about this with Diko...but I suppose we have to bring it up again?" Lightning said.

Diko, who was standing diagonally behind Lightning with her arms folded, nodded expressionlessly.

Lightning leaned her elbows against the back of the chair in a slightly immodest position, then turned to Diko with a reluctant look on her face. Ranyi stared at the flashes of pale skin on the nape of Lightning's neck peeking out from behind her hair, before hurriedly pasting on a serious expression.



“So there’s something we haven’t talked about,” Lightning began.

“Uh-huh... What is it?” Ranyi asked.

“Umemizaki Junior High apparently has something they’re calling a Founding Festival. They’re hard at work making all sorts of things for it, even after dark.”

“Oh, really? Wait—right now?”

“Also, I was ordered to join the class by Old Blue. Oh, do you know who Old Blue is? Her previous name was Lapis Lazuline.”

“Um...well...yes, I do know her.”

Ranyi’s put-on seriousness immediately disappeared, and her face contorted in shock. It wasn’t an unbelievable thing to find out, but it was surprising to hear stated directly. And yet, Lightning’s visit to the hospital with Diko backed up what she said. Ranyi moved just her eyes to look at Diko and saw her silently nod. This was no lie.

This was definitely a shock to Ranyi. She wished her master would’ve told her about this, but there had to be reasons why she hadn’t, so she couldn’t criticize. If anything, maybe she should be happy about this—since basically, Lightning was with them.

“Um...that’s a good thing, right?” asked Ranyi.

“It is,” Lightning answered.

“You’re not a Lazuline candidate, right, Lightning? Are you...a mercenary?”

“No, I’m part of the organization—that’s the Research and Development Department, not Lazuline. See, I’ve been with the organization from the start, so I think you can trust me more than a mercenary.”

“Oh yeah. I trust you. But why are you telling me this now?”

“About that—according to Old Blue...”

There was neither familiarity nor respect in the way Lightning said “Old Blue.” She was indeed different from Lazuline candidates. Of course, Ranyi was aware that her master was deeply involved with the R&D Department, but she had no idea what sort of work she was doing specifically. She didn’t know the mages or magical girls who worked there, and it wasn’t strange that she didn’t know Lightning, either.

“There’s been a slight change of plans. Rather than our main

objective being to steal a relic from the ruins, she says we want to focus on blocking the Caspar Faction...what Group Two is trying to do.”

“A change of plans? I haven’t heard about this.”

“The situation’s different now. There’s Snow White—she showed up. I was disappointed that she’s not very strong—but look at it the other way: If she can be the Magical-Girl Hunter even though she’s not that strong, that basically means she’s a scary person. Stealing the relic would make us thieves and put us up against her, right? But if we’re mainly obstructing, that means we’re actually on her side.” Lightning tapped her head with her index finger. “It’s apparently not as incredible as what was written in our textbook, but she can read minds. I even had some memories hastily removed before Snow White transferred in.”

Ranyi clenched her fists. She was sweating from nerves. Lightning was talking about this weighty subject as casually as that day’s school lunch.

That was probably Lazuline the Third’s magic. If the Third was using her magic on Lightning, that meant that Lightning was just that close to confidential information.

Lightning was quite brave to let her memories be taken away, even if it was only parts of her memories for a brief period. Ranyi was ashamed of herself for feeling a little put off at the idea of strategically removing an ally’s memories. She lacked determination.

“They probably did that because they don’t want certain things to get out, but don’t you think that’s a bit much? Granted, I can’t remember what those things are, so I guess it doesn’t really matter. Oh, except it seems like they generally haven’t removed anything about my life at school. I haven’t forgotten you, either.”

“Right.”

“I mean, they won’t go that far on you two, so don’t worry. But you won’t be able to exchange secret information with Old Blue anymore. Keep that in mind.”

Ranyi hadn’t been exchanging any secret information before, but she couldn’t argue, so she just nodded.

“Originally,” Lightning continued, “it was me and you and Diko. The plan was to bring us into the magical-girl class from both directions...with you two investigating and me doing sabotage.”

“You mean...like that thing you used when you fought Adelheid

that one night?" Ranyi asked while looking toward Diko. She didn't really react. Maybe Ranyi shouldn't have asked.

Lightning's brow furrowed slightly as she brought her spoon to her mouth. "Yes, that's part of it."

In hindsight, lending that dagger to Group One in their mock battle against Group Two was indeed a type of sabotage. This made sense in a lot of ways, and most of all, Ranyi was grateful and glad to have Lightning as a solid ally whom she could rely on. Being too open about how glad she was might make Lightning look down on her, but she also didn't want Lightning to think that she wasn't pleased, so she clapped her hands with an expression that she hoped looked modestly happy.

"Aw, I'm glad. It's so great to have even more allies. And I know for sure I can count on you, Lightning."

Ranyi joyfully reached out to the puddings and took one in hand only to find it was empty. She placed the empty jar on the table, put a hand into the box, and took another pudding but found it was also very light. Ranyi peered into the box. All the puddings were gone.

"I'm sorry. It seemed like you weren't eating, so I assumed you didn't need them." Lightning put her hands together. Was that an apology, or was the implication, "*Thanks for the food*"?

Ranyi smiled and nodded. When she looked at Diko, she was silently scooping up the pudding from a glass jar with the spoon in her right hand and bringing it to her mouth. It seemed she'd secured her own portion before Lightning had stolen it all.

"Oh, right," Lightning said. "Diko let slip that you're going to be discharged."

Ranyi automatically looked at Diko, who averted her gaze and made an unusually awkward expression.

Lightning hid a smile, seemingly amused by Diko's reaction. "Everyone was so glad. Dory and Arlie were even dancing. You're quite popular, Ranyi."

Ranyi knew she was blushing and prayed it was no more than a faint pink tinge that wouldn't embarrass her further. She scratched her head and laughed.

◇ **O Lulu (Love Lulu)**

“Wonderful, wonderful. You truly have done well.”

Frankly, she thought it was no good at all, but she kept that to herself and instead offered praise and applause.

But Ripple, the magical girl she’d just complimented, didn’t so much as twitch, not even opening her eyes as she lay on the bed. She was wrapped up with bandages like a mummy—magic bandages that were part of her treatment—and O Lulu knew Ripple was aware and cognizant of what she was saying. Basically, Ripple was just ignoring her.

Lulu’s smile faded into a bitter scowl. If Ripple wasn’t looking at her anyway, then it didn’t matter what kind of expression she had.

“We should transfer you to someplace a little better, but hold on for just a bit longer. Right now, the most important thing is to stay hidden. Maybe this won’t make up for it, but I brought lots of medicine, so your treatment will be speedy. And I’ll also use my magic on you. Okeydoke?”

Ripple didn’t react.

Lulu’s brow remained furrowed as she looked around. This dim business hotel room with the curtains drawn felt small even with just the two of them in it. But Ripple’s silence didn’t appear to be a complaint about their location.

Lulu became even more annoyed. Her initial impression that she wouldn’t be able to get along with this girl had yet to change.

Ripple was indeed gravely wounded. Normally, she’d be sent straight to the hospital, or at least to the R&D Department. But they couldn’t do that now. Frederica and the Caspar Faction had eyes all over the place, and few people could be trusted. With all that going on, in order to operate as a commando unit, Lulu and her allies had to maintain the utmost secrecy and caution.

Eliminating three fighters on her own was an incredible feat. Anyone other than Ripple might have acted arrogantly about the accomplishment. But it was her own fault that she’d gotten so badly wounded in the process. These weren’t wounds of honor; she’d been unnecessarily injured because she’d gone to the trouble of avoiding killing people when it would have been fine to do so. Meanwhile, Ripple emerged completely unscathed when Lulu helped her take out Kimiera.

However...

Yes, thinking about that now, that had been a turning point.

She felt like ever since then, Ripple's attitude had hardened to the extreme, and she had become pigheaded. Ripple disabling Kimiera and Lulu finishing her off had been a wonderful display of teamwork, considering how impromptu everything was. But Ripple was furious that they'd taken a life, and she said that from here on out she would do things alone. Lulu scowled at her and pointed out how that was impossible, only for Ripple to capture two more people without killing them. She offered Ripple a half-hearted compliment for that, but Ripple didn't respond.

Initially, Lulu had been irritated with Ripple. They'd been in a do-or-die situation. You had to stay sharp when your enemies were Archfiend Cram School graduates, and on top of that, they were terrible villains who had killed tons of people for their own pleasure. They needed no mercy, and there was no reason for Ripple to be mad at her for killing one.

Lulu's first impression of Ripple was that she'd pruned herself down to the essentials, that she was tough on herself and did away with the unnecessary—there was even something brutally tragic about her. The light in her eye was strong and sharp as a beast's. O Lulu never would have imagined that she was a softy who hated killing.

Next, Lulu had been irritated with her teacher, who hadn't properly explained Ripple's quirks. She'd told Lulu to back up Ripple in order to whittle down Frederica's forces and explained Ripple's history and an overview on her magic and fighting abilities—but she failed to include anything about Ripple's distaste for killing. And when you considered how Ripple looked, too, there was no way you wouldn't think she was a demon of revenge with no mercy or pity.

Lapis Lazuline the First was very capable, but she wasn't a person of good character in any shape or form. The other Lazuline candidates, like Ranyi, who had been endowed with the mission to infiltrate the magical-girl class, worshipped her like a god—but she wasn't a god, and she wasn't even a decent person. She was dishonest and secretive. Lulu thought only a fool would trust her, then get betrayed and cry about how this wasn't what they'd been promised.

Nonetheless...

Lulu felt there was a significant chance that her master deliberately neglected to mention how Ripple didn't like killing.

Lulu's magic involved the use of gemstones. Not in a flashy way like with the Second Lazuline's teleportation. It was a very modest skill that amplified the power a stone had and caused effects in others. The worthless white gemstone she had just slid under the rug—a little moonstone that represented *health*—was amplifying Ripple's own powers of recovery. Most likely, Ripple wasn't even aware she was being helped.

The stone that she had inserted at the scene of the Kimiera attack had been a blackish-white sillimanite. It meant *warning*. A bright red ruby meant *majesty* and *elegance*, and a bluish-purple tanzanite meant *a prideful person*. She had mixed a little of various stones and fine-tuned them, putting in such a small amount of magic that only someone with high sensitivity would just barely notice, and buried them under the ground. She had made Frederica think of a specific person, to confuse her. If Lulu undid her magic, no more than grains of sand would remain, not even magic power to be felt. Precisely because it was a delicate, weak, and vague magic, she could surprise people with it.

She'd embedded the impression of Pukin in Frederica to make her afraid of Pukin's shadow so that she wouldn't be paying attention to the presence of other assassins.

Right after Frederica had Ripple murder Premium Sachiko and undid her brainwashing, Lazuline the Third had approached Ripple. At the time, Ripple had been enraged and ready to go try to kill Frederica, but the Third had removed her feelings of anger, and when Ripple had lost all her driving force, the Third had taken her into custody and hidden her in a shack in the wilderness. Of course, this was while ensuring that she wouldn't know this was the doing of the Lazuline Faction and the R&D Department.

Frederica had come to peek in on how Ripple was doing numerous times, but all she could see was Ripple, cooped up alone and having lost all her will and energy. Eventually, she must have judged that she'd completely broken her and lost interest, as Frederica had stopped observing her, and after a little bit longer, Ripple and 0 Lulu had begun acting as a commando unit.

Lulu didn't know how much point there was in this. But it was clear that the First thought it was important. Right now, Frederica was as wary as an old cat. She also had her eye on the First Lazuline's activity—if Lazuline tried to dispatch anyone, then Frederica would immediately vanish, and if she attacked Frederica

with a small party, Frederica would run away immediately. The odds were good that a commando unit unknown to the enemy would become vital.

They would make a single tiny wound on the most troublesome weapon Frederica had: her powers of judgment. Right now, that was enough.

CHAPTER 3

MAY I JOIN IN?

◇ Class 2-F

“There’s a leftover jelly!”

Everyone in the classroom looked toward the girl who’d just yelled. She wore glasses and had her hair in a braid: The leader of Group Two, Mephis Pheles, was covering the plastic container with her body to protect it.

“Hey, hey.” A girl with a ponytail, Ranyi, stopped her. “Why’re you hunching over like that? Planning to take the leftover jelly for yourself?”

“If I was, then I’d just keep my mouth shut and eat it. I’m protecting a commodity. The last time there was a dessert left over, *someone* went and gobbled it down without asking.”

All eyes yet again moved at once. The girl with long black hair who so elegantly held a spork—Princess Lightning, the leader of Group Three—blinked as if trying to show off her long eyelashes, then pointed to her face with its beautiful, perfect jawline. “Did I do something?”

“Don’t give me that shit. The last time there was some frozen mandarin oranges left over, you’re the one who just took them and ate them.”

“At the time, there were no rules established as to how anyone would acquire the leftover desserts, were there? In other words, what I did was not against the rules.”

“Oh-ho, I see. That makes sense.” Ranyi seemed to be the only one completely convinced by this. She nodded a few times, but the other students were basically looking at her coldly.

Mephis was particularly enraged, and she slammed the table with a fist. “Even if no rules have been established, you stuck to the

rules of being human!”

“It wasn’t an issue by *my* personal rules. I hadn’t heard anything about your rules, so I didn’t know. Are we done now? We’re just going to keep talking in circles.”

At this point, everyone in the class imagined that Mephis would become enraged at Lightning’s provocative statements—though Lightning herself probably didn’t mean any of it to be provocative—but then someone stepped in to help instead. The blue-eyed and blond-haired girl who came to stand beside Mephis, Thunder-General Adelheid, put her hand out in front of the enraged Group Two leader to stop her.

“Hey now, calm down. Talkin’ ’bout the past now ain’t gettin’ us nowhere. We gotta talk about right now. Today, Miss Calkoro was called out of the class and ain’t here for lunch, and there’s one extra jelly. There’s no way we can all split it among ourselves, so someone’s gonna get it—and now we’re talkin’ ’bout who that’ll be.”

The small dark-skinned girl, Arc Arlie, raised her hand. “Rock-paper-scissors!”

Drill Dory, who looked exactly the same as Arlie, followed up with, “Battle!”

A girl with a black bob—the student representative and leader of Group One, Tetty Goodgripp—had Arlie and Dory sit down, and then next, a girl with evenly cut short hair and light brown skin, Kumi-Kumi, said, “There’s...too many people here for rock-paper-scissors...and we can’t...fight now...,” weightily stating the obvious.

“Then let’s find some other... Ah, okay.”

Classical Lillian, a girl with pale skin and long, messy black hair, started to say something, but when she noticed everyone was looking at her, she winced and drew back.

As if taking over from the statement she’d given up on partway, a girl with a medium bob dyed a slightly dark color, Sally Raven, raised her hand. “Then I have a suggestion, yeahhh. It’d take time for everyone to compete at once, so we should just have the leaders act as representatives, and then the victor’s group can split it or decide a final winner.”

Sally didn’t touch on the presence of the girl sitting beside her. Pshuke Prains’s wavy hair swayed as she kept on muttering.

“Then as for what game...,” Sally began. “I think musical chairs would be good, yeahhh.”

Sally's sudden and baffling suggestion brought a doubtful look to Mephis's face. Then she suddenly looked up at the very striking-looking girl who was behind Sally with her arms folded—Diko Narakunoin, complete with a Mohawk and a facial tattoo of a Nue.

She had a strong physique and good athletic reflexes. At a glance, playing musical chairs was a crazy way to compete, but Group Three clearly thought that they were at the advantage with someone strong like Diko on their side.

Mephis snorted. "So sure you're gonna win, huh? Fine, I accept. You guys better not have forgotten."

"Yes, I can't have you forgetting me." Kana, the only one who remained in magical-girl form, smacked her chest.

But Mephis told her off quietly, "Not you. Are you trying to get someone killed?" and she drew back as if nothing had happened. Kana could be too proactive sometimes, but she was also obedient.

"I can agree to a competition of physique. And being the tallest in the class basically means she's gonna be best at musical chairs." Mephis slapped Adelheid's back beside her, and Adelheid puffed out her chest confidently. She was over five feet tall—so if you didn't add in the Mohawk, then even Diko couldn't match her. She was like an adult mixed in among children.

"Hey, hey, don't go forgetting Group One."

Rappy Taype, with her brightly colored hair inappropriate for middle school and her even more inappropriate heavy makeup, stood. "Since in our group, we've got someone who's better at musical chairs than anyone else. We're counting on you, Miss Ril."

A plump girl, Miss Ril, got to her feet. She wasn't as tall as Adelheid or Diko, but she had them beat in weight and volume.

"If you're shoving at each other, that comes down to a competition of weight."

A dignified strength could be felt from her calm smile. She was normally quiet and reserved, but she was also good at playing along.

The teacher Calkoro wasn't there to stop them. Under Tetty's instruction, they all worked together to move the desks and chairs, making a space in the center of the room where they placed a single chair, and the three girls surrounded the chair. Then the rest of the class surrounded the girls, some raising fists, others putting hands to their mouths to cheer on their group members.

Sally's magical phone began playing the opening theme of the

first *Cutie Healer* series. The three girls started walking around the single chair. The game of musical chairs over fruit jelly had begun.

◇ Koyuki Himekawa

It was after school. She used the gate to jump from the school to the Inspection Department, and from there she used another gate to jump to a spot close to her house. Even saying it was close, it was still two stations away, so she took the train to head home. In the mornings, she did all this the other way. This was Snow White's—Koyuki Himekawa's—commute to school.

While swaying on the train, Koyuki thought back on the events of that day.

During lunch break, they enjoyed a game of musical chairs between the groups over some jelly. Her classmates had gotten very excited about it. Even the normally quiet Lillian and the serious group leader Tetty had loudly cheered on their group members. Only Pshuke had muttered insults about the other members, but that was also another form of cheering.

Koyuki had been the one person with a cool head. She'd pretended like she was enjoying herself so she wouldn't stick out, but deep down, she had been cold as ice. The others were a dazzling sight to her, and she was envious.

She'd been sent in by the Inspection Department to investigate this dubious magical-girl class, so investigation was number one, and she had no intention of enjoying her life at school. But before she knew it, Koyuki Himekawa was having friendly chats with her classmates, and she even believed her smiles felt sincere. When that happened, she would hastily get herself focused again.

It had been proposed that she be appointed as the teacher, but she would feel bad for Miss Calkoro, so she had decided to transfer in as a student. But now, she felt that if she had been the teacher, maybe she would have been able to draw a line between herself and the students.

There were a lot of different magical girls in the class. Diko and Adelheid prioritized their missions over everything else. But they enjoyed themselves when it was time for fun and worked when it was time to work. They were able to compartmentalize. Kumi-Kumi did worry about Frederica, but she spent every day doing whatever

she could to find a conclusion. While Ranyi couldn't abandon her admiration for Lazuline, even with the vague awareness that it was beyond her, she pretended not to notice and was doing her best—both of them were always working as hard as they could. Tetty and Miss Ril were sincerely diligent as students.

What they had in common was their hope for the future.

As a fake student, when Snow White compared herself with these youthful and straightforward girls, she felt like she was twenty or thirty years older. But even then, she didn't let it show on her face, mediating between Arlie and Dory, laughing at Rappy's jokes as she watched the others.

She heard the mixed fear and respect for her nickname of Magical-Girl Hunter. This all came from thoughts, so Snow White couldn't stop herself from hearing it. She understood better than anyone that she wasn't that kind of person, but the voices wouldn't stop.

This wasn't limited to just the magical-girl class. Princess Deluge had been the same way. Fighting in the cave that she'd occupied with the Puk Faction, Snow White had almost killed Deluge—and of all things, using the weapon of Princess Inferno, who had been Deluge's friend, and also a childhood friend of Snow White. Deluge had only avoided death thanks to her vitality and luck.

Revenge had led Deluge to wield her strength violently, but loss had broadened her view. She'd come to have a type of respect for Snow White, who had defeated her, and Snow White had come to hear Deluge's thoughts holding her in esteem. Even when she wavered, she was facing front.

Snow White wanted to hold her head and scream. She couldn't help but remember the time when she had been controlled by Puk Puck. Even if her responsibility hadn't been questioned because she'd been controlled by magic, many had died. And each one of the voices of their hearts continued to echo inside Snow White. In the underground laboratory, she had heard the voices of the magical girls who had been about to be killed, but she had ignored them. Snow White had been doing that constantly, that whole time.

And then she had been entrusted with Inferno's memories. In N City, Snow White had sworn to Hardgore Alice that she would continue being a magical girl who she could be proud of. She would never forget how she had felt when La Pucelle had lost her life. So

long as she was holding the baton that those girls had handed her, Snow White had to clench her teeth and move onward.

And then there was Ripple. And Fal, too. They needed Snow White. She had to save them. Even if she was so ashamed she wanted to scream, even if she remembered things she didn't want to remember, she had to keep going.

The train PA system announced that they were nearing their destination. Koyuki's eyes idly turned to the distant scenery. It was definitely an unfamiliar sight. Which reminded her, when she was transformed into Snow White at school, she never heard any voices at all from the courtyard, but if she was to ask about that, who should she go to...? And then before you knew it, she was back to her mission.

◇ **Pythie Frederica**

Someone outside the class was up to no good. She had to deal with that eventually, of course, but for now, Asmona could take care of it. Frederica had multiple things to do; she couldn't be preoccupied with that cheerful bunch even if they were being attacked.

She'd completed a certain amount of fishing around regarding the incarnations, but she would also have to meddle a little in the magical-girl class. A week had passed since Frederica heard from Adelheid that Snow White had transferred in, but Frederica had yet to get a grasp on how the situation had since changed.

She wanted to know a little bit more about the magical-girl class and about how Snow White was doing with them. Since Frederica hadn't been able to use her magic on Snow White for a little while now, it was best to stay in contact with her classmate Kumi-Kumi. Frederica hadn't met with her since before the homunculi incident.

Frederica peered into her crystal ball to leap to Kumi-Kumi's location, but for some reason, it was completely dark, and she couldn't see anything. This was unusual. Very odd. This was different from being unable to use her magic on Snow White—she'd activated her magic but could see only darkness. This might make sense if Kumi-Kumi was at school, but right now she should be at home. Something had happened to Kumi-Kumi.

In the Caspar Faction's living room, Frederica bent all the way

backward and buried herself in the sofa.

Experience told her there was just one answer. If her magic's target was dead, her crystal ball would show only darkness. Had she been attacked like Kimiera and finished off?

Frederica rolled over on the sofa and buried her face in the cushions.

Now she turned on her magical phone and sent a message to Kumi-Kumi. Frederica already considered it about a 95 percent chance that Kumi-Kumi was dead, and this was just in case, to confirm that there would be no response—but contrary to her expectations, a message came back instantly.

Gazing at the text asking her what was going on, Frederica tilted her head. She was the one who wanted to ask what was going on.

Frederica got up off the couch and walked to the right side of the room toward the exit, and from there she spun back around to walk to the window—on the way, she started to kick aside a wriggling bag, then came to a stop.

It really was odd. Frederica's lines of communication were everywhere. If something had happened to Kumi-Kumi, there was no way Frederica wouldn't get a report. In other words, Kumi-Kumi was completely fine with nothing amiss, but Frederica's magic hadn't reached her. This was strange.

Frederica spent half a day after that checking the safety of the area around Kumi-Kumi's house. She couldn't find any particular problems. She lived in a quiet area with not many people passing by her apartment. No enemy forces had placed a watch there.

Frederica used the hair of a dispatched subordinate to leap to Kumi-Kumi's neighborhood, and making sure the area was quite secure, she remained transformed as she rang the bell.

Ordinarily, this wasn't a matter for Frederica to go deal with directly herself. The odds were fairly high that this was a trap, and it was the height of madness to try to confirm this personally. If Asmona found out about this, she would click her tongue with a bitter expression. But Frederica knew herself best of all. She was not the type who'd be able to put up with a situation like this. Forcing herself to put up with it was just too terrible for her health—it would take years off her life in the end.

Such was the excuse she made to herself, making the visit with a certain amount of preparedness for death, but Kumi-Kumi came

out to the front door with a look on her face like this was nothing. Frederica had sent her a message beforehand this time, so Kumi-Kumi was expecting her visit. She didn't seem surprised—Frederica just got the sense of, *"I don't want to get dragged into trouble,"* wafting aggressively from her whole body.

It was Kumi-Kumi. It didn't simply look like her—she reacted just like Kumi-Kumi had before, too. Frederica was shown into the house. She checked out the interior of her small apartment, but there wasn't anything particularly strange about it. It was the same as before. So then why was it that Frederica's magic had stopped working?

Feeling the thinness of the cushion placed atop her seat, Frederica sat down, wetting the inside of her mouth with the barley tea that was served to her. The taste was the same as before. It was the cheap but relaxing taste of home. Letting out a breath through her nose, she raised her chin.

What's this...?

She smelled something off. Thinking it was the tea, she had another sip. Then she brought it to her nose to sniff it, but that wasn't it. No. It was something else. Kumi-Kumi was looking at her with suspicion, but Frederica ignored her. Frederica sniffed three or four times, then placed the Japanese teacup with the tea in it on the table and sniffed a fifth and sixth time.

Standing up, she circled around the table clockwise, approaching Kumi-Kumi. Kumi-Kumi hastily tried to rise to her feet, but Frederica stopped her, saying "stay there."

Frederica stood in front of Kumi-Kumi, who was looking up at her in apparent confusion. But Frederica was confused, too. She was trying to figure out the reason for this sense something was off, but she had no clue at all what was going on.

"Please undo your transformation."

As ordered, Kumi-Kumi returned to human form. Frederica placed her hand on Kumi-Kumi's head and petted her a little roughly and audibly. The reason she didn't touch her hair gently was because she wanted to make sure to check the feel of her hair. The sensation of her hair in her hand told Frederica something certain.

Letting out a sigh, Frederica looked at Kumi-Kumi again, and Kumi-Kumi was staring up at her fearfully. Frederica noticed that her own face was stiffened into a severe look, and she released

Kumi-Kumi's head, looked the other way, and massaged between her eyes with the hand she'd been petting with. At the same time, she inhaled the smell of her hand, confirming the smell of the hair.

"Transform one more time."

She had Kumi-Kumi transform and repeated the same process.

Frederica went the other way along the same route to return to her chair and sat down. She observed Kumi-Kumi from the same eye level. She was looking back at her without hiding her confusion and fear.

Frederica casually dropped the single hair of Kumi-Kumi's that remained in her palm into her pocket, put a hand to her mouth, and coughed intentionally. "It's been a long time."

"Oh, yes."

"I didn't have any particular business today...but I came to see if you were doing well. By the way, has anything changed at school? I've heard that a new student has transferred in."

While observing with a smile on her face as Kumi-Kumi spoke falteringly, Frederica thought. She didn't look like anything but the real thing. If the issue hadn't come to the surface in the class, that had to mean neither the teacher nor the students had noticed anything unusual about Kumi-Kumi.

Frederica didn't have any special attachment to Kumi-Kumi—if anything, she was in the position of a bad adult trying to use her. But a magical girl being changed into something else made Frederica feel anger that was difficult to restrain.

◇ Kana

In the three days since Ranyi's return, Kana had been observing her. She saw various sides of Ranyi: Ranyi asking Diko questions, Ranyi being overawed by Lightning, Ranyi checking on Pshuke, Ranyi looking at Sally with envy—and judging that she was now as energetic as she had been before going to the hospital, she was relieved. Dying meant you'd never come back, but Ranyi had just barely skirted the line of death and survived, and so had been able to return. That was a very happy thing.

Understanding that full well herself, on the day of Ranyi's return, Kana rose to her feet to welcome her with applause. Ranyi seemed a little confused to come into the classroom and have

everyone celebrate her. The class atmosphere had changed so much since she'd gone to the hospital, so Kana figured it was no wonder she would be taken aback. As for what specifically was different—before, Kana would have had a vague idea of it, but she hadn't been able to verbalize it, and if she'd have spoken with someone about this thing she didn't understand, she would have gotten a reaction like, *"Why the heck doesn't she get this?"*

But Kana wasn't anything like how she'd been before. Her daily studies had transformed her from a former prisoner of unknown origins into a student. She was certain something was different now.

At noon on the day that Kana observed Ranyi's full recovery without talking about it to anyone, they all put their desks together to have lunch, and Kana, the one person in magical-girl form, finished eating first before she brought up something with her friends in Group Two.

"Well then, I'd like to talk about what we're going to do."

Everyone looked at Kana. Kumi-Kumi, who was having trouble sticking her straw into her carton of milk; Mephis and Adelheid, who had been talking about the latest chapter of a manga; and Lillian, who seemed like she was unsure about whether to reach out a hand to help Kumi-Kumi—they all had baffled looks.

"What we're going to do...?' Like what?" Mephis asked.

"This some kinda philosophical thing?" Adelheid added.

"You mean...what we should do...as magical girls...?"

"Ummm, I'm sorry, but you have to explain what it is you mean, or I don't think I'll quite get it... Sorry."

"Stop apologizing over everything, Lillian," Mephis shot back.

Kana realized her mistake. She had assumed that everyone would have noticed and so had skipped a lot before making that statement. She would modify it, adding a little more detail and making it more understandable. She should already have experienced that mutual understanding was grounded in an effort to be understood—she was bound to mess up everything if she skipped steps there.

Kana assembled in her mind everything that she had to talk about, hypothesizing a route that should work, and began to speak. Everyone had already finished eating, the issue of Kumi-Kumi's straw not sticking into her carton of milk had been resolved, and they were patiently waiting for Kana to begin speaking.

"It was at the middle school... Yes, the other classes that aren't ours, where the students aside from magical girls go."

"Ahh, Umemizaki Junior High," said Mephis.

"Huh? Something happen there?"

It seemed like Adelheid honestly didn't know. Kana thought that showed a serious lack of attention, but maybe this was just how much Kana had grown, being able to keep an eye on things around her like this. If that was the case, then it was her job as a classmate to tell Adelheid what she had noticed.

"I saw when coming to school," said Kana. "They were making big arch gates in the courtyard."

"Ahh, that. The Commemoration of Foundin' or whatnot," said Adelheid.

"It's the Founding Festival. Many of the manga I've borrowed from Mephis are set in school, and I have a general understanding of what a festival is for a school. Just in case, I questioned Calkoro to confirm that there were no discrepancies. For the Founding Festival, groups such as classes or clubs will each produce a stall, production, event, or research project."

Mephis had been listening with an uncomprehending look, but now she muttered, "Ahh. So by what are we gonna do, you mean, like, you're talking about if we're going to participate in the Umemizaki Founding Festival."

"That's exactly what I mean."

Mephis put a finger to her glasses and scowled, Adelheid folded her arms and looked up at the ceiling, Kumi-Kumi muttered something under her breath, and Lillian looked down in deep thought. All their own modes of discomfiture.

Kana was visibly confused. "That's an odd reaction," she told them.

"Uh, sure, maybe," said Mephis. "But we're not supposed to get too involved with Umemizaki, right? I doubt we're gonna be participating in this festival."

"Yeah, Ah think that'd be the typical assumption," Adelheid agreed.

"This is news to me," said Kana.

"Uh, sure, maybe, but...", Mephis began.

"They'd probably...just tell us...not to...do anything uncalled for," Kumi-Kumi pointed out.

"I don't think it's uncalled-for," Kana insisted. "The student

handbook acknowledges that we are borrowing Umemizaki Junior High's property. Wouldn't it be a problem to simply receive this benefit while not returning the favor?"

"Hey now, would that be returnin' any favors? Ain't that just pesterin' them to join in 'cause we want ta be in the festival? It'd just cause them trouble to join in on the event with some self-servin' interpretation of the rules."

"Now that seems like a self-serving interpretation. Imagining what they might think and assuming we should abstain won't benefit either party. We should ask whether it's good or bad."

"Just who should we ask, though?" asked Lillian.

"I've already learned that if you ask Calkoro, she just goes on about how she has no authority and such," said Kana. "I have no intention of pointlessly troubling our teacher."

"So then...who should we...ask...?"

"No, no." A scowl on her face, Mephis closed her eyes and waved a hand. "You're gonna take this to the principal, aren't you? No way, I don't want her watching me harder than she already does."

"Oh yeah, Ah hear you've met the principal, Mephis."

"Don't say it like it's some nepotistic connection. It's the opposite."

Kana thought that fundamentally speaking, being the group leader, Mephis should offer her opinion directly to the school principal. But if she just didn't want to do it, then someone else would have to be the one.

"Has anyone aside from Mephis met the principal?" Kana asked. Adelheid, Kumi-Kumi, and Lillian all shook their heads, and Kana nodded. "Then there's no choice but for me to go. For better or for worse, my magic is related to questions. I've refrained from use as much as possible, but when would I use it if not now?"

"Hey, don't— Hold on."

"Let's be a little more cautious 'bout this."

"That's like...hitting a bomb...with a bomb."

"Negotiations! Let's have some more negotiations, please!"

They all stopped her at once.

Group Two made a lot of noise during lunchtime that day, and you didn't need to use a magical girl's heart to overhear what they were talking about. They were discussing whether to participate in Umemizaki's Founding Festival, and when Kana reached the dangerous-sounding proposal of directly asking the principal, everyone stopped her.

"What a conversation they're having, huh?" Rappy looked more amused than her remark sounded as she shrugged. Unlike Group Two, she kept her voice down so that others couldn't hear. "I hope they're not gonna do anything too reckless, though. Y'know, since Kana's like—kinda, well, I wouldn't say reckless, but it does seem like she doesn't value herself much when taking action. Like the time with the homunculi, I hear things got bad when she defended Kumi-Kumi."

Miss Ril giggled. "You defended me, too, Rappy."

Rappy must have been embarrassed, as she blushed, for once, and waved a hand. "Nobody defended more people than you, Miss Ril."

The two laughed, shoulders shaking, and Tetty, who had been one of the causes of defending and being defended, laughed along with them.

Arlie and Dory didn't really understand about the Founding Festival. They launched questions at Snow White using words she didn't quite understand, and Snow White then answered them in words neither sister could understand.

Tetty smiled as she reflected on things. It seemed Kana had met the principal before. Mephis said she'd seen her before, too, but it seemed she didn't like her. Mephis aside, Kana meeting her had to have been because she'd entered the school through a different route from the other students. Maybe the principal had judged that she had to make sure what kind of character she was, or it would be rather dangerous to let a former prisoner transfer in.

But if that was why they'd met, Tetty figured they wouldn't be close enough for Kana to be making requests. They'd only met because there had been an issue with Kana; a problematic character walking in with a new problem wouldn't produce a friendly response from the principal.

Tetty had never met the principal. But she did know Satou, who would have met the principal.

For her elementary school cultural festivals, they had done

things like making a map of old buildings of their hometown and putting it all together, or gathering old stories told in the region, writing them out, and making them into a book. She also seemed to recall they'd made udon and pounded mochi, using the money they'd gathered to get a new hutch for the school pets or things like that. She remembered having gotten excited about it with her friends and having fun.

She looked at Snow White, who was in between Arlie and Dory as they took turns talking to her, then at Miss Ril and Rappy, who were laughing as she prodded Miss Ril in the side. Tetty had yet to figure out Snow White, but maybe if they had some kind of event, they could make friends. And making something and doing something together was sure to be fun for the other members of the group.

Moving just her eyes, she looked at Group Two. Mephis was talking to Kana with a serious expression. Maybe she was trying to convince her to give up on this reckless idea.

Was it really reckless? It wouldn't cost anything to just check, so shouldn't Tetty, the student representative, be the one to try?

Mephis placed a hand on Kana's shoulder and shook her head. Seeing her swaying braids, Tetty made up her mind—she would try asking Satou, who had been concerned about her trouble with Mephis. If they worked together on something for a big event like that, maybe she could make up with Mephis.

◇ Sally Raven

Sally wouldn't blame the group leader's character for it, but Group Two was fundamentally lacking in reserve, and they would talk loudly during lunch, too. Even with Group One between them, Kana's suggestion had been audible to Group Three. Sally thought, *Huh, that's an interesting conversation*, but taking the initiative to touch on their conversation felt like eavesdropping, so she hesitated to say anything.

But while Sally was wondering what she should do, Princess Lightning, who wouldn't worry herself thinking about such things, touched on Kana's declaration. "The Founding Festival is coming up?"

"I think it's in about two weeks, yeahhh." You couldn't expect a

decent answer from Diko or Pshuke, and Ranyi had just gotten out of the hospital, so Sally answered. Once she'd put that into words, she immediately thought, *Won't it seem like I'm paying too much attention to things if I know the scheduled date for Umemizaki Junior High's Founding Festival?*

The changes around school, like the arch gates being made in the courtyard or the stage that was being put together, would just make most people think about how the festival was going to start. Sally knew the specific date because, of course, she had looked it up—in order words, she was thinking too much about it.

Lightning let out an apathetic *Hmm* and swallowed her bread roll in one bite. Or she ate it so fast it was like she was swallowing it.

"I've never participated in something like that," she said.

"You mean...like a school festival?" asked Ranyi.

"Yes, that. Have you all had one before?"

"Ahhh, well, I haven't really had the opportunity, yeahhh," said Sally.

Diko nodded silently, and Pshuke muttered under her breath. It seemed that she was saying that it wasn't like she'd never participated in one, but it hadn't really been interesting or anything.

"I don't remember ever being serious about one," Sally replied as she reflected on her past.

All through elementary school, and in middle school before joining the magical-girl class, magical-girl activities had been Sally's number one priority, so she hadn't taken anything else seriously. It had been the most she could do to get enough time to study, learn, train, and polish herself as a magical girl—it had been no time for putting effort into a club or extracurricular activities or hanging out with her friends. She was aiming to be a Cutie Healer, the pinnacle of all magical girls, so she had to drop the unnecessary or she couldn't manage. The desire to have fun with something immediately led to laziness and would cut off her path to becoming a Cutie Healer.

Sally wasn't unique in this regard. All the Cutie Healer candidates in the PR Department were like that. If you tried to enjoy your school life, you'd just get left behind.

Sally had managed to stay at the top of the class in school, academically and athletically, and she'd had a decent number of

friends with a broad but shallow association. For events like cultural festivals and choir concerts, she'd slacked off skillfully enough that others couldn't tell while making it look like she'd been participating properly—so she thought.

So Sally hadn't thought much of school life, but it wasn't as if she'd had no desire to enjoy herself at all. *Cutie Healer* had depicted girls enjoying school and seasonal events many times, and that had the power to make a fan feel like she'd like to experience that, too. But a candidate couldn't be like a fan, and Sally had been forced to give up on her school life.

It was probably for similar reasons that Diko, Lightning, and Ranyi had never participated in anything like a school festival. The kind of elites who would get into a magical-girl class would put being a magical girl first in their lives every day.

That Pshuke had been to one but hadn't enjoyed it was possibly due to her own personality and character—but even taking that into account, Sally figured things would be different now. Pshuke had been accepted, including her incorrigible tendency to constantly mutter insults, and if she participated in this class, she'd probably enjoy herself along with the rest.

Thinking this far, Sally took a gulp of milk. She should settle down a bit. This really felt like she was leaning in the direction of participating already. This was too optimistic.

"Do you think it would be fun?" Lightning asked.

"I dunno. It does seem fun, yeahhh."

"It wouldn't be very interesting, anyway..."

"There you go again, Pshuke. You won't know unless you try it."

After saying that, Sally thought, *Ahhh*. She really was leaning toward participating. She just couldn't let go of her yearning for the school festivals that generations of *Cutie Healers* had enjoyed.

"Mm. True, you won't know unless you try," Lightning muttered, not at anyone in particular. Sally thought that she was getting bad ideas again, but she stayed quiet and slurped her vegetable soup.

◇ Lapis Lazuline the Third

Lazuline was alone, hard at work cleaning the large bathing area

that was a part of the Lazuline candidate training facility. No matter how she scrubbed and scrubbed, the limescale wouldn't come off. Since it was about as large as a school pool, it would take some time, even for a magical girl. If she'd had a magic sponge, she could have finished this faster, but she had nothing like that. Even after being chosen as Lazuline, a Lazuline candidate couldn't escape odd jobs. Their master was always strict.

And even said strict and capable teacher was forced into incredible labors for the success of the artificial magical-girl project. For starters, it was difficult to lead it to success with the R&D Department alone. They didn't have enough of anything: funds, personnel, connections, technology, or time. Maybe her master had assumed that they would have help at the time when she had devised the plan.

It wasn't enough just to have people with power and money on their side—they had to have the same goals to a degree. The existence of artificial magical girls would shake the Magical Kingdom's current position of absolute supremacy.

Pfle had cleared all those various conditions. She had sought the power to be able to go up against the Magical Kingdom, had been the department chief of Magical Girl Resources, had possessed wealth, and had been so aggravatingly sharp. And maybe the fact that she'd been one of Cranberry's children had been a major factor, too—though if Lazuline asked her master that, she would be sure to deny it.

Pfle had been the one collaborator who had fulfilled all necessary conditions, but she'd died in the Puk Puck incident. Her miraculous maneuvering to protect Shadow Gale had surprised Lazuline—but according to her master, that sort of sentimentality and placing emotions first had just led to her dying with her goals unfulfilled.

But Lazuline knew.

Pfle's aspiration hadn't been the artificial magical-girl project, nor had it been to overturn the Magical Kingdom's position of supremacy. Her ultimate goal had only ever been to keep Shadow Gale safe, to separate her from all the dangers of the Magical Kingdom. The artificial magical-girl project, her position in Magical Girl Resources, everything had been there for the sake of one retainer. Lazuline had reluctantly extracted a candy from Pfle on her master's orders—after sucking on it herself to confirm

everything Pfle knew about the artificial magical-girl project, Lazuline now knew what she'd really been after.

That candy had been a massively complicated and annoying pain. She regretted that she hadn't separated the memories and the emotions first.

Not long before then, during the facility attack by the Sage incarnation Grim Heart, the Lazuline Faction had captured an artificial magical girl. Combining the technology they'd acquired from that artificial magical girl with Pfle's memories, they had completed the definitive edition of the Princess Series: Princess Lightning.

But not everything in the world would go well. After entering the magical-girl class, Princess Lightning, who was supposed to have been the definitive edition, had begun to do as she pleased. All they could do was pray that Diko and Ranyi, who had joined her, would be able to get a handle on her.

While scrubbing the bath with a brush, Lazuline considered. She didn't worship her master like some of the Lazuline candidates did, but she didn't hate her. She actually liked her. But a lot about her master's recent behavior didn't sit well with her. She wasn't supposed to feel antipathy toward her master, but it was getting hard to look at it positively.

When she tried looking back to ask when it had been that she'd started looking at her differently, it really was after she'd sucked on Pfle's memories and feelings. Lazuline had perfect control of her magic, and a candy she'd sucked on had never disturbed her mind or behavior before, but thinking back on Pfle's quirks, she couldn't help but think that she should take that idea seriously now.

For example, as she was thinking idle thoughts while cleaning right now, suddenly, Shadow Gale would pop into her mind. Thinking about how Shadow Gale was now with Deluge made something indescribably strange well up within her and brought a smile to her face.

These changes in her heart felt unsettling but also interesting. They seemed as if they'd been influenced by Pfle, and yet they were very Lazuline-like, too.

◇ **Pythie Frederica**

Kumi-Kumi was no longer Kumi-Kumi. Frederica's sense of smell, sight, taste, touch—all her senses, sharpened to perceive magical girls, sensed that something was off, leading Frederica to believe that this was not the original Kumi-Kumi.

Frederica sneaked a single hair from this person who appeared to be Kumi-Kumi and returned to the Caspar Faction's headquarters, then ordered a technician to investigate the hair. The results came back in two days.

At the very least, it wasn't human; it probably wasn't a magical girl, either. In order to come up with a more accurate conclusion, they would need the time, personnel, and facilities.

She had anticipated that answer. Sadly, the Caspar Faction was lacking in technology compared to the other two factions, and analysis would take time, as well. The Caspar Faction couldn't even match the Lab, which was just one department the Osk Faction commanded.

She'd expected the hair analysis results to take time, so over those two days, she came up with a hypothesis. There had been something intermingling with the scent, the air of a magical girl. Over the course of two days, Frederica checked over everything—smell, atmosphere, presence, and sensation, from that which was familiar to herself and that which was not, and reached the conclusion that there was a homunculus mixed in it.

And not just any homunculus—an extremely high-tech homunculus. It wasn't merely shaped like Kumi-Kumi; it transformed and used magic like her.

It was a far more high-end product, and it was far more high-functioning compared to the typical black-silhouette homunculus. It wasn't just her appearance; it was what was inside. The workings of her mind manifested in her gestures and actions. This wasn't simply an imitation. It was Kumi-Kumi herself.

Was it a reproduction of her as a homunculus? It was far too elaborate for a magic copy. Maybe it wasn't a copy. If you used what was "inside" Kumi-Kumi as is, then of course it would appear to be nothing but Kumi-Kumi.

Thinking about the existence of high-tech homunculi reminded her of the magical-girl class. The class originally had a firm defense of many homunculi, and Frederica had heard that during the accident, homunculi with the appearance and abilities of magical girls had poured out to cause a violent struggle.

The Information Bureau had been mainly in charge of cleaning up after the magical-girl class's mess, but the Lab was cooperating with them, too. All the various attempts to reproduce an incarnation had yet to be successful, but if you were asking who was in the lead in the field, then that was the Lab. In other words, she could also imagine that they would have some ideas about the transferring of souls.

Rising from the sofa, Frederica stretched her back, tilting her face to look at the chandelier. Glasswork magical girls danced in it. Just looking at them was enough to soothe her.

She could only make guesses right now. And for that, she needed more material, too. Investigating Kumi-Kumi first would be highly dangerous—she couldn't even establish what was going on with her.

Frederica closed her right eye and looked down again, kicking up the bag at her feet to drop it in a corner of the room. Ignoring the wriggling bag, she pulled out her magical phone.

She was aware she was rattled. Replacing a magical girl from the class with a homunculus was truly incendiary. It didn't matter that this had happened to Kumi-Kumi specifically. Frederica was angry because she was a self-admitted magical-girl maniac who didn't care what others thought and was more obsessed with magical girls than anyone else. This was like righteous indignation—that was why she judged herself to be not calm enough.

Frederica called Asmona on her magical phone. Though Asmona lacked the talent to come up with even one idea, she was far superior to Frederica when it came to business affairs, and she was capable of logical and rational judgment. If you wanted someone at your side for an opinion, Asmona was your girl.

Summoned over via a phone call, Asmona seemed to be in a very bad mood. A deep wrinkle was carved in her brow—not the kind of look you should show your employer. Her attitude softened a little when Frederica explained the situation, but then the wrinkle in her brow immediately returned to its original depth. She sighed and tugged the excessively garish newsboy cap on her head down over her face.

“Just to confirm,” Asmona said, “we can't ask the magical-girl class directly?”

“It's not completely impossible, but it would be extremely difficult to do.”

This had originally begun with the matter of her no longer being able to observe Snow White. Frederica had been glad about that at the time, thinking that surely Snow White must have done something interesting to counter her. Snow White entering the magical-girl class had made it difficult to keep an eye on things.

“No matter how difficult it is for you to spy on them, you need to have an eye on the class,” Asmona confirmed.

“Yes, that’s right.”

“So then it’s easy. You should approach one of the other infiltrators, aside from Kumi-Kumi. Kana...would be a little risky, but one of the Honor Guard would be fine, or Adelheid. That’s it—why not Adelheid? We’re still having her do regular reports, aren’t we? There was no need to use an amateur like Kumi-Kumi in the first place. I can guarantee Adelheid. She’s still young, but she’s a professional. She’s not just strong; she can adapt to the needs of the moment. She got that from her mother.”

Asmona had been a senior student to Adelheid’s mother in the Archfiend Cram School. In other words, she was doubly Adelheid’s senior. Frederica did understand the desire to support her much younger junior. Besides, even setting aside such emotional bonds of obligation, Adelheid was a fully-fledged professional. Mephis Pheles gave too much priority to emotion, and Kumi-Kumi was too timid. And Classical Lillian valued harmony so much, she tended to only go halfway on things.

“Hmm...you’re right. How about I contact each of them aside from Kumi-Kumi and Kana?”

“Aren’t you being too leisurely about this? The other magical girls are really busy, so you should be busy, too.”

Ignoring the prickle of nastiness there, Frederica nodded with a smile. “I want to ascertain if anyone has noticed anything about the change in Kumi-Kumi, and also if anyone aside from her has been swapped with homunculi. I doubt that swapping Kumi-Kumi would be the end of it. I should create multiple routes by which to share information so I can respond to the situation if someone is replaced at any point. And it’s true that I’m busy, but I’m loath to tell someone else to do this. It’s difficult to explain specifically how she has changed, and even taking a single hair requires proficient technique. It would be rather harsh to tell someone unused to it to do it every time.”

Asmona’s brow relaxed slightly. Frederica continued, secretly

relieved. "I would like to retrieve all of Group Two if possible, but right now I cannot peek into the magical-girl class. If I don't have cooperators on the inside, then I will lose the information war. I will not pass any important information to Kumi-Kumi, and I will warn them not to share information among the whole group. I will also periodically meet with them to check. I shall pray that they will not all have been swapped."

"Why not withdraw only Kumi-Kumi?"

"It's true that her presence might be dangerous, but I don't want to make an oversensitive gesture that could alert them that we've noticed. And besides, she can at least fill out the group numbers... Look, just sitting all together in the room, it should be like a reenactment of a scene from a magical-girl anime where all the enemy leaders get together. Just like us right now," Frederica joked, thinking all the while, *Asmona will tell me off for saying something like this.*

But unexpectedly, Asmona asked her with a serious look, "The enemy leaders getting together?"

"Yes."

"You mean we're the enemies?"

Frederica nodded twice with her best smile. "That's right. We're public enemies."

CHAPTER 4

GOING TO THE FESTIVAL

◇ **Tetty Goodgripp**

Hearing Kana's proposal during lunch break was what had made Tetty seriously consider the magical-girl class participating in the Founding Festival. So it was no surprise at all that she was able to get the cooperation of Group Two—rather, of Kana. When Mephis, sullenly and silently pouting, had handed her the signatures of all the members of Group Two, Tetty had thought, *Ah, Kana did this*. It seemed highly likely to Tetty that Kana had thrown a classy and argumentative tantrum about how much she wanted to participate, and not knowing how to deal with her, Mephis had figured she could just take their signatures and had everyone write them out.

So Tetty had managed to deduce about the cooperation from Group Two. But she was surprised to get signatures from Group Three as well. Still, she could imagine it. Looking at Lightning, who had foisted the signatures on her, saying, "I'm counting on you," Tetty could envision her going around to every stall in the Founding Festival to cover every type of food, then going for a second round to boot. Normally, the way Lightning went so directly for what she wanted was a little scary, but right now, it was helpful.

Stacking the signatures she'd taken on her desk, next, she checked over Group One's signatures. Miss Ril's writing was good. Rappy wrote in a surprisingly mature manner. Snow White's characters were cute, which was also surprising. Arlie's and Dory's characters were energetic. Then Tetty wrote her name very carefully, checking it over three times, before nodding and adding Group One's signatures to those of Groups Two and Three, and taking them in hand.

"We're counting on you, student rep!"

“You can do it, Tetty!”

“Shouldn’t I accompany you?”

“Kana, just sit down and be quiet.”

“You don’t have to push it, yeahhh.”

“It’ll be okay. Tetty will do it for us.”

“Counting...on you...”

With her classmates’ encouragement and support—plus some shrieking—sending her off, Tetty left the classroom. She wasn’t headed to the principal’s office. She was going to the courtyard. Even just thinking about handing the signatures straight to the principal gave her a stomachache, but by putting Satou between them, she could mitigate the mental strain.

She headed into the courtyard in high spirits, but Satou wasn’t there. The mage was generally there around this time, but not always. Not being able to meet here was, well, unsurprising, but she kind of felt like the ladder had been pulled out from under her. Tetty sighed.

She’d had the wind taken out of her sails, but if she got discouraged over this, then she wouldn’t be able to come up with an apology for the friends who had helped her. She figured she should just come again the next day.

Tetty returned the way she had come, and on the way, she ran into Calkoro going around a corner in the hallway, drawing an “Ah!” from her. The moment she saw her face, it struck her rather belatedly that if she was going to hand the signatures to someone as a cushion between her and the principal, wouldn’t Calkoro be the first choice? That was what made her go “Ah!”

Calkoro was looking at Tetty curiously. Tetty considered how she should explain herself. The reason she had automatically removed Calkoro as a candidate was, of course, because she wasn’t reliable. Tetty even got the sense that the teacher was intentionally showing her lack of motivation. That, combined with her by-the-textbook classes that consisted of her doing what she was told and how she was told to do it, of course meant that she wouldn’t think of the teacher as reliable.

But she couldn’t just say nothing here. On the other hand, speaking her mind was even more out of the question. Feeling backed into a corner, Tetty immediately decided to hand the signatures to Calkoro. While she regretted having gone and done it, she would explain that the whole class wanted to participate in the

Founding Festival. Seeing Calkoro's expression gradually cloud over and clearly give off the vibe that she found this a hassle, Tetty thought, *Agh...*, but this was all she could do.

Parting ways with Calkoro, she returned to the classroom with quick steps as she considered. From what she recalled of Calkoro's expression, she couldn't help but feel like the chances were incredibly low that those signatures would reach the principal. She had to somehow gather the signatures again—so that she could hand them to Satou this time, for sure.

◇ Calkoro Culumff

Calkoro had been left with a serious drag of a request and entrusted with an incredible hassle. She plucked the three folded sheets of loose-leaf paper in her fingertips—in other words, she held it like something she didn't want to touch but was forced to bear. It was fair to say this was a manifestation of her state of mind.

She doubted the principal would be okay with such a proposal. Not only that—Calkoro might get yelled at for having brought her the proposal from the students. No, it was fair to say she would definitely get yelled at. Imagining the flow of rage that would begin with, *“Why in the world would you bother bringing something like this to me?”* anticipating that it would surely become reality, she already felt dejected.

She considered just crumpling it in her hands right now. One option would be to *not* hand the signatures she'd received to Halna and tell the students, *“I gave them to her, but don't get your hopes up,”* and then just sort of wait for time to pass.

But there was one student in the class with unusual initiative. Kana. It might be dangerous to have time resolve the issue. If Kana asked the principal directly what happened to those signatures, that would spell disaster.

How about telling the students, *“I tried to hand over the signatures, but she got angry and said no, and she ripped them up and threw them away on the spot?”* But that would also be over if someone spoke to the principal directly. That wouldn't work, after all.

Calkoro turned around, went back to the staff room, and sat down in a chair. Leaning back in the chair, she stretched her back

and realized: So long as the class had an unstable element like Kana, there was nowhere to run. That girl really had no clue about how to show deference to authority. None whatsoever.

If not for Kana, things might have worked out somehow, but Kana wasn't about to go away. Calkoro clicked her tongue, cursed Kana's existence, and worked out a different plan.

She would bring the signatures to Halna. But rather than telling her that this was the students' wish, she would report that there was foolish activity among the students. If she reported to Halna that the students were doing something unsettling while adding in her opinion about how outrageous this was, what a disgrace it was, and how they should give the students a lecture—then Halna might share in her anger, but she wouldn't yell at her.

All right, she thought, slapping her knee. She'd come up with a decent plan. Kana's presence wouldn't be a bottleneck, either.

Standing up, when she looked out the window, it was starting to get dark. Coming up with the optimal idea had taken way too much time.

Calkoro bustled to the entrance of the staff room, put a hand on the door, and stopped there. Her head was giving the order to hurry, but her hand wouldn't move. She licked her lips. During the homunculus incident, Calkoro had proactively gone to protect the students. Her motive had been self-preservation, of course. If any students ended up injured—to say nothing of if even one died—the blame would fall squarely on Calkoro, and as a mage, she might never recover from that.

In other words, she had gone into the woods for selfish reasons. But after saving them, she felt like she viewed the students somewhat differently, compared to before the incident—and maybe this was her imagination, but they seemed to view her differently, too.

Her students were not her friends—they were just students. Calkoro reporting to Halna wouldn't count as betraying her friends. She tensed her right hand on the staff room door, then grabbed her wrist with the other hand and tugged. Finally making a crack that one person could slip through, she sidled through it and closed the door.

Calkoro set her right foot forward with determination, making her left foot follow. She headed down the hallway.

In fiction, she had seen plenty of teachers who would risk their

lives for their students. She wouldn't say it was a lie that she'd even thought, *That's really nice, what a great teacher*. But when it actually happened to her, there was no way that she could do the same thing—or so she had thought, but seen objectively, wasn't what Calkoro had done back then in the forest exactly like the teachers in fiction?

It was true—that behavior had felt satisfying. And if she were a great teacher, what should she do now? Calkoro should know that. But her thoughts wouldn't come together.

She knocked. Hearing the response prompting her to enter, she opened the door and went inside. In between each one of these mundane gestures, she continued to think, but she couldn't come to a conclusion.

I can't come to a conclusion?

No. She had. Before her eyes was a large desk, and behind it sat Halna, looking to be in a bad mood like usual. The ends of her pointed ears were twitching—was that some kind of portent? She had to figure out her superior's state of mind, but she couldn't get anything more than that she seemed to be in a bad mood.

"These came from the students, you see."

When Calkoro pulled out the loose-leaf sheets, Halna knitted her eyebrows tightly. That gesture terrified Calkoro—and the next moment, she sensed that something was off. Halna's expression seemed to speak less of a bad mood and more of the fact that she was baffled by this sight.

Halna placed her right hand on the desk. Under her fingers were some sheets of loose leaf.

Now Calkoro's eyebrows were furrowing. "Ummm, that's..."

"The students' signatures. They say they want to participate in Umemizaki Junior High's Founding Festival."

"Ah, yes. I received the same signatures."

"Why would they submit them twice?"

"Um, I...couldn't really say."

Muttering, "What is this? What is the meaning of this?" Halna plucked away the signatures Calkoro had brought and compared the two of them. "I can't find any particular differences."

"Oh. Um, so did the students hand those signatures to you directly...?"

"No. There's no need for you to worry about that."

Halna snorted and shooed Calkoro out of the room with a wave

of her hand. Calkoro hurriedly bowed her head. When she slowly looked up at Halna, the principal was now scrutinizing the two sets of signatures, comparing them.

Calkoro briskly left the room, and under the light of the setting sun, she returned to the staff room, closing the door behind her, after which she leaned on the door and breathed a deep sigh.

She was still terrified. Had they sent in a double copy of the signatures to show the strength of their feelings? It was a shortsighted and childish tactic, though maybe some adults would be moved by that. But it was unreasonable to seek that from Halna.

After waiting for her breathing to settle down, Calkoro sat down in a chair. There was a grating creak as Calkoro felt relieved. But she also had a feeling that she couldn't express well. There wasn't really a need to express it, though. She prayed from the bottom of her heart that such a decision wouldn't come a second or third time.

◇ Kana

That day, Kana let Mephis go back home first, while Kana returned to the school. Mephis seemed suspicious of her behavior but was busy with something of her own, and she couldn't watch Kana forever. Before she headed home, Mephis told Kana over and over again to absolutely not get up to any funny business.

Kana had no such intentions, of course. Just as she had explained to Mephis, "Once I see how Umemizaki Junior High is doing, I'll come home." This was ultimately just a brief stop, no more than a little idling on the way back, and there was no need to worry. Mephis's excessive worry had to be out of consideration for Kana, in addition to her serious responsibility as the Group Two leader.

It was evening. Kana zipped from shadow to shadow of the school building, approaching the Umemizaki Junior High field.

She wasn't planning on breaking the many "Umemizaki rules," such as that they were not to make contact with the regular students of Umemizaki or not to cause trouble for Umemizaki. Kana had been in prison because she broke laws and rules. If she broke rules at the school as well, she would be seen as unrepentant and might be sent back to prison. She would make sure to stick to the

rules when observing Umemizaki.

The magical-girl class's signatures would have safely been handed to Halna. Tetty had them write out the same signatures twice—even if that didn't mean double the odds that the signatures would go through, wouldn't that make it at least one point seven times more likely? And if the odds of it going through were high, that meant, in other words, that they would be participating in the Umemizaki Founding Festival.

That was something to be glad about, but Kana was also uneasy. Having just gotten out of prison, right now Kana had, as they would call in the slang that she had learned from manga, "prison brain"—she was ignorant of the ways of the world from her time in prison. She was behind the other magical girls when it came to the culture of Founding Festivals, cultural festivals, or school festivals. Of course, she had never participated in one, and all she knew about them was from manga or encyclopedias.

At this rate, she might hold the others back. And that was in no shape or form what Kana intended. So then she would observe Umemizaki Junior High to confirm just what this Founding Festival was all about. This would put Kana, who would have been a step or two behind, at the advantage instead by taking the first move. She would leap from being a possible burden to a position in the lead.

Fortunately, preparations for the Founding Festival were being carried out after school. So the time of day would pose no problem. And though it would be difficult even for a magical girl to observe what was going on inside the school, she could steal glances from a distance at what was going on at the school field.

Kana slipped along, approaching the area, then hid herself behind a ginkgo tree planted alongside the field. The goal of her observation was in the center of the field, where they were making something with arms and legs.

Since it was a festival, they had to be putting together a monument. Maybe a juggernaut statue, or a wicker man? There were two objects they were working on, laid down side by side. Her positioning was bad, and there were people around, so even with the vision of a magical girl, she couldn't see the objects in full.

Kana moved behind different trees and climbed others, coming up with various efforts and ideas to continue her observation, but she just couldn't get a good view. And as she continued doing this, the number of people around decreased. Once there were only three

people left, one student rushed up to them to tell them something, and the four of them hurried away into the school building.

The people were gone from the field. Kana acted without hesitation. She wouldn't let this opportunity escape her. She ran straight to the middle of the grounds, stood next to the creations, and looked down on them.

Lying there were some strange, mysterious, and very peculiarly shaped statues. They had spherical heads—the left statue was all red, and the right statue all green. Their faces were extremely cartoonish and simplified—in other words, they were manga-like. They gave her the sense that manga culture had permeated everything.

Kana changed positions and changed angles to observe the set of two statues.

They were made of Styrofoam, shaped by carving, adding pieces, painting, and gluing on the outside. It didn't look like they'd made the outfits but rather reused some regular clothes.

Continuing her observation, Kana concluded that they had made statues with the heads of *ume no mi*—plums—because the school was called “Umemizaki,” and clapped her hands. *What a great idea*, she thought. Their craftsmanship was thorough even in the details, and their use of color would outdo a professional. They had also been considerate enough to spread newspaper underneath the statues to keep them from getting dirty. This was beyond student-level.

“Um.”

Someone had just spoken to Kana, startling her. She turned around to see a female student from Umemizaki looking up at her hesitantly. Her glasses and braids reminded Kana of Mephis, but she could sense no hidden ferocity in her.

“You're from the special advanced course...right?”

She was not alone. Behind the girl with the glasses were two boys and two girls, making a total of five students looking at Kana with expressions filled with the curiosity of that age.

Magical girls had such sharp senses; they would normally never be taken by surprise by regular people. But since a magical girl's concentration was just as excellent as her senses, her immersion and absorption in a task was superior to that of a human or a mage, and sometimes she would be unexpectedly surprised while she was concentrating.

Right at that moment, Kana was one of those magical girls unexpectedly taken by surprise. She had been so absorbed in observing the two statues, she'd become blind to the world around her, and before she knew it, she was surrounded by students from Umemizaki Junior High.

Kana considered. A mistake was a mistake. But just because she had made a mistake didn't mean it was over. What to do from here depended on Kana's skills. It should be possible to recover from this.

She had wound up breaking the rule not to interact with students at Umemizaki Junior High. Well then, should she escape, to keep deepening this wound? Kana considered that a poor move. Running off like this without doing anything would simply make her suspicious and hurt the reputation of the magical-girl class. That would also wind up violating the rule that they weren't to cause trouble for Umemizaki.

In other words, now she should respond to their questions while exercising her common sense.

Kana nodded. "That's right," she replied.

The students shouted in joy.

"Wow! This is the first time I've seen one up close!"

"You guys are allowed to wear makeup and stuff, aren't you?"

"Your fashion is amazing. The teachers don't get angry at you for that?"

"Wow...so pretty... Amazing... Adorable..."

"There's someone like an adult, right? Is that person a student? Not a teacher wearing a uniform?"

"Your Japanese is so good. Have you lived here a long time?"

"What sort of things are you studying?"

"You have such a pretty voice..."

Kana could hear all their questions, even the whispers from the rear, so she answered all of them. She couldn't talk about anything related to magic, so it required the utmost caution and presented some serious mental strain on Kana, but she was still able to enjoy herself. Since there had been hardly any opportunities to come into contact with those outside of the magical-girl class, it was a very fresh experience.

The next day, when going to school, Kana was immediately surrounded.

“Ah heard yesterday you were talkin’ with kids from Umemizaki.”

“Were there any hot guys? Any hotties?”

“I don’t think it’s good to break the rules. So, what were they like?”

“Did you talk about the school lunch?”

“What’d you do?”

“I really wanna know!”

“Stop crowding her! Questions for Kana go through me, the Group Two leader!”

Being showered with questions one after another, Kana thought, *It’s about the same everywhere you go.*

◇ Snow White

“There were more than a few magical girls to survive.”

Calkoro wrote on the chalkboard while the more diligent students copied out their notes. The less diligent students weren’t paying attention. Koyuki was pretending to be a diligent student, moving her pencil as she thought about something else.

Despite their petition, Snow White anticipated that they probably wouldn’t be allowed to participate in the Founding Festival. The school could refuse in any number of ways: They could use Kana’s blunder in having made contact with the Umemizaki Junior High students as an excuse or come up with some other reason. But surprisingly, the response from the principal was, “Permission granted, with restrictions.”

They were going to be notified later as to what wouldn’t be allowed for the festival, so it was possible there’d be some outrageous restrictions that would make it functionally like they weren’t in the event, but the signatures had been a success. Everyone in the class was glad to a greater or lesser extent, and Koyuki felt a sort of cheerful air in the classroom, even during their dull lectures.

Koyuki pretended she was happy like everyone else, but she wasn’t glad deep down. While listening to Calkoro’s completely lifeless class, Koyuki pondered some things.

They were so cautious about security, you could say high security was one of the concepts of the magical-girl class. But after

the homunculus incident, they'd withdrawn all the security homunculi at once under the pretext of inspecting them, and there were still hardly any alternative security measures. All that protected the safety of the class were security cameras.

In view of their original policy, there was nothing useful about participating in the Founding Festival, and it would only lower their security for no reason. It was all harm and no benefit.

"The answer, Snow White," the teacher called.

"Cranberry's children," Koyuki answered.

"Yes, exactly right."

Why were they willing to ruin their defensive perimeter like that? Snow White didn't really think it was to curry favor with the students. And there was no way they were doing it on a whim or as a change of policy. She couldn't help but feel like there was some goal and that it was a threatening goal.

During their five-minute break, just as Koyuki had directed beforehand in the letter she'd passed her during class, Arlie insisted that she wanted to go to the bathroom, and then the other group members chimed in that they did, too. But Koyuki knew that Tetty had gone to the bathroom during the previous five-minute break. Koyuki said, "There's something I want you to teach me," opening up her textbook as she called out to Tetty to hold her back, separating her from the rest of the group very naturally.

Koyuki quickly got through her questions about the schoolwork and then got started. "Oh yeah, we wrote our signatures twice, didn't we?"

"Oh, yeah. Sorry for causing you trouble," Tetty replied.

"No, it wasn't trouble at all. But I was wondering why."

"About that—I handed the initial signatures to Miss Calkoro... And I feel bad saying this about her, but I didn't think we could really trust her."

"Ahhh, okay. I mean, I can kind of understand that...though I feel bad saying it."

The two of them looked at each other and smiled. While smiling, Koyuki was thinking. They had unexpectedly gotten permission to join in the festival. She had assumed that the unusual act of writing out the signatures twice had been related to that, but was that not actually the case?

"Did you take the second set of signatures to the principal?" Koyuki asked.

“Absolutely not. I’d be way too scared to take them directly to the principal. I left it with Mr. Satou...wait, no, um, the janitor? I guess?”

“Mr. Satou?”

“Oh, uh, sorry. I’ve just been calling her ‘Mr. Satou’ in my head.”

“That’s not her real name?”

“Oh no, not at all. She doesn’t look anything like Mr. Satou. Everything about her is different from a Japanese person.”

“Huh? Then why the nickname?”

“Um, well, it’s kind of like...the way she acts, her gestures, and the way she talks and things are a lot like this old man called Mr. Satou who lived next door to me a long time ago... Ahhh, I could never say this to her, though.”

At a glance, they appeared to be having a mild and pleasant conversation, but Snow White’s mind was continuing to work, coldly and quietly.

According to her prior research, there were only two staff in total of the magical-girl class: the principal and the teacher. There was no janitor. Of course, it wouldn’t be strange for there to be someone in charge of maintenance for the class. There was the dead body that had been found during the homunculus incident—just about all blame had been foisted on their poor maintenance. Was Satou some outside cooperator, like a technician from the Lab? If the principal had received the students’ signatures from this person and allowed them to work as the magical-girl class’s janitor, then they must have occupied a position fairly close to the principal.

But Snow White had never heard the thoughts of this Satou, not even once. Was this person never in trouble? Or had Satou never left the courtyard and had just always been there? Just what was being done there?

It seemed like it would be difficult to find out any more about Satou from the voice of Tetty’s heart. Snow White didn’t get to be transformed for long; it wasn’t something Tetty would be in trouble to have known, and Satou wasn’t causing her trouble, either.

She didn’t have enough material to go off. She wished she could have used the fact that some students were in contact with Frederica as a reason to send in the inspectors, but doing that would lead to someone she couldn’t afford to let get away getting away. And some of these students weren’t at fault at all, but they

were all essentially constantly exposed to danger—and Snow White still wasn't able to make her move. It made her want to sigh, but she couldn't sigh, after all.

Listening for the voices and footsteps of the rest of the group returning, Koyuki ended the conversation.

◇ Pythie Frederica

Those Frederica had hired, or those she had been about to hire, were frequently being attacked by a mysterious figure. There had been three attacks, and there were seven people missing—she was impressed that they'd done so well in a short period of time. If it became a rumor that getting hired by the Caspar Faction meant you'd be attacked, it would be even more damaging than those numbers.

Frederica stopped canvassing for mercenaries for the moment and subtly changed the type of information that she circulated in the faction, by route. It was a minor enough change that it wouldn't cause confusion, but it would reliably create a difference. Her plan in doing this was *not* to start by ascertaining where the information was leaking from, and nab the source—rather, her idea was to use false information to manipulate the enemy to her convenience. But that was ultimately just a hopeful idea on her part, and she didn't know if it would actually go that well. If they were operating on the orders of Lazuline the First, then they might catch on to Frederica's behavior. But even that on its own should make it harder for the mysterious attacker to enact violence as they pleased. They wouldn't be trying to repeatedly use that as a leak route once it had been exposed.

She changed her point of contact for exerting influence on the magical-girl class as well. She cut off her line with Kumi-Kumi. And then she made contact with Mephis and Lillian and decided to directly meet Adelheid as well.

Mephis and Adelheid were safe, but they'd gotten Lillian. She was the same as Kumi-Kumi. She had changed into something different. Two people out of five having been taken away was no laughing matter. At this rate, if she stood by and did nothing, there was no guarantee that the remaining three would stay safe.

She prompted Mephis and Adelheid to be careful and

maintained this line, without cutting it off. She would act cautiously until she made major use of it at some point.

Mephis had never quite trusted Frederica until she had proved that she was in a position to give orders. Frederica felt that it wasn't that she was a highly suspicious person, but rather that she fundamentally hated taking orders from someone. It wasn't a bad thing to have a strong rebellious spirit.

She had already met with Adelheid. She came off like an assertive person, but she was hiding herself. Though Frederica figured that in the trade of mercenary, you couldn't expose details about yourself, as her employer, Frederica wanted to have a grasp on her character. Normally, Frederica would have made to know Adelheid through untiring stalking, but right now she didn't have the time. For that reason, she decided to take the easy way and ask someone she knew.

"What is Adelheid's personality like?"

"She's a serious magical girl," Asmona answered with a truly severe expression—this was coming from one of the top three most serious magical girls that Frederica knew.

Sitting on the sofa with a table in between them, Frederica muttered, "Hmm," then stretched her back. She looked up at the chandelier, confirmed out of the corner of her eye that Asmona was furrowing her brow in displeasure, and feeling somehow satisfied, she returned to her original position. "By that, you mean..."

"She's serious at her core. Of course, she will try to reliably complete a mission, and she hates...well, doesn't really like irrational behavior, irrational magical girls, and irrational events."

"Why did you just reword 'hates' into 'doesn't really like'?"

Asmona fell silent for a while. She was probably considering how she should express it. Then she slowly opened her mouth. "This is ultimately only my personal opinion."

"Yes, yes, I don't mind that, so please tell me."

"Adelheid hates irrationality in general, but I sometimes feel like at her core, you can see flashes of that being a sort of self-loathing of her own irrationality. And I would hazard that her own irrational areas are an admiration of irrationality."

Frederica nodded, thinking about how Adelheid spoke with an accent for some reason even though not only was she not from that region of the country, she'd never even lived there temporarily.

"I see," said Frederica. "A senior will observe their juniors

well.”

“That’s just part of the job. But that’s ultimately only a feeling I get, from my perspective. This personality tendency of hers has never caused her to bungle a mission.”

“Well, that’s fantastic.” Frederica clapped her hands with a modest smile.

Asmona set some papers on the desk seriously and without any reserve, rapping them twice with the back of her hand. “More importantly, regarding the information that they’ve brought...”

“Yes?”

“It says that it’s been decided that they’ll participate in the Founding Festival.”

“Oh, to be young.”

“Combined with how they’re undermanned in security homunculi, I would say that penetration has become even easier.”

Frederica only drew her chin back without making any interjections as she fixed a steady gaze on Asmona.

Asmona touched her index finger to the rim of her glasses and pushed them up, adjusting them. “This almost seems like they’re inviting intrusion.”

“Mm-hmm. I very much agree.”

◇ **Lapis Lazuline the Third**

Any site for the Research and Development Department, both at the headquarters and at the branches, would have a “room that should not exist.” What looked like an unassuming door at first glance actually led to a surprisingly large room that could be opened with certain gestures or spells. It wasn’t only the R&D Department that would have such rooms—any Magical Kingdom facility would have one. When you first learned of their existence, you might be excited, but eventually you would become used to it, then sick of it, and you would come to use them normally, just like any ordinary room.

Here, the headquarters training room was such a place. The vast room, at one side a half mile long, far exceeded headquarters itself in volume, but it existed without causing any problems. Before Lazuline had become Lazuline, she’d really run and jumped around a lot in here.

She didn't use it anymore. Even if she were kind enough to consider training her juniors, time wouldn't allow that. Her schedule was packed with work, and she had no time off. Despite not wanting to make use of a magical girl's toughness for something like this, she was working anyway.

This was the first time in a while that she'd come. In the broad space with a pale-blue floor, ceiling, and walls that went on forever, Lapis Lazuline and the magical girl who had abandoned the name of Lazuline, Old Blue, were facing one another.

Her bangs were pinned with a little nemophila flower clip, and she used a hair decoration reminiscent of cat ears to keep the rest of her hair back. Appropriate to the founding Lazuline, she wore lavish amounts of blue: Her hair was bluish gray, her eyes were purplish blue, and the brooch at her chest was pale blue while her costume was a deep navy.

"It's been a long time since I've seen you transformed," said Lazuline.

"It has."

The two of them came forward. Neither of them assumed a fighting stance. The nemophilas that decorated key points on Old Blue's costume had a pleasant aroma. Lazuline liked it.

"Are you all right, master? You shouldn't be too reckless."

"There's no need to worry."

"I don't want to be pushing you at your age."

"I'm the only one who can challenge you in sparring."

"Well, yeah."

The magical girl before Lazuline wore a smile on her face. Her gentle, kind air may partly have been an expression of her true nature, but it wasn't everything. Those who mistakenly assumed it was would pay the price.

The heel of Lazuline's palm made a pleasant sound as it was blocked by her master's upper arm. She wrapped her fingers around it and went for a grapple, but her teacher shook her off her sleeve and wouldn't let her. They went through repeated strikes and blocks at short range, gradually getting faster. The First could see everything Lazuline was trying to do, and her master's feet never moved from the spot as she continued to stave off her attacks.

Her master could see the true nature of everything. When Lazuline used her magic to the maximum with her peak martial arts, enemy attacks would never touch her.

At zero distance, Lazuline fired a knee and an elbow, then turned around for a back leg roundhouse kick from a clinch, but her master immediately pulled away for a kick at her back—Lazuline twisted around to try to catch her leg only to be shaken off.

Landing on both feet, she slid in low to try to catch her master's leg again, but her master leaped backward, then stopped and came forward again. When her master tried to come in close, Lazuline turned her attack aside and caught it between her hands, but her teacher slid out of her grasp yet again. Lazuline rose to her feet with a kick, then landed on her raised leg and slammed her back into her master, who absorbed the hit, jumping to parry the attack's momentum.

Her master turned once in the air, added a twist for a second turn, and landed prettily in a way reminiscent of rhythmic gymnastics, then spread both hands at her student and bowed her head saying, "I've lost."

"Huh? It's over?"

"It's over. Since I don't want to continue any further."

Old Blue raised her palms at her. Some of her nails were broken, her finger bones were cracked, and her metacarpal and ulna were damaged. Lazuline felt somewhat satisfied at these results. She'd known that she was physically stronger, but her opponent had the Lazuline magic, so she couldn't directly touch her skin; Lazuline had been forced into a battle with restrictions. It was fair to say her strategy of aggressively attacking and making her take damage by blocking had gone decently well.

Her teacher clapped her injured hands, and the color of the room changed from pale blue to cobalt blue. Along with the change in the room, her injured hands went back to how they'd been before, becoming beautiful, sparkling hands once more. In this training room, it was possible to fight safely indefinitely.

Although, that came with the proviso if you ignored exhaustion. When her master said, "Come on, one more," Lazuline puffed up her cheeks like a child.

"Our match is over, and I won, so listen to what I say, master."

"We had no rule like that."

Even if it was a mock battle, you'd think that the student winning would make the teacher either a little meeker or angry instead, but Old Blue seemed no different at all. Lazuline figured this had to mean she saw through this, too.

“If you understand that I’m strong, then isn’t that enough? Now you can be at ease, too, right? Let me go already. I still have work to do—actually, I think it’ll never end. And you’re the one who tossed all that work at me.”

Lazuline understood better than anyone that she was acting childishly. She did act that way around her master, but she was increasingly unsure just how much she leaned on her. Old Blue was her respected teacher, so surely it was all right to lean on her, but she wasn’t really sure.

And surely her teacher saw through that, too.

“I want to see how strong you are now so that you can do your work properly.”

“Come on... Agh, that’s such a hassle.”

“Can you beat all magical girls just because you can beat me? Of course not.”

Old Blue approached her casually, without going into a fighting stance. Seeing her like this, Lazuline had no choice but to strike back. Though she complained, they struck at each other and fired moves off at each other, the two magical girls continuing to fight in the vast training room.

◇ Princess Deluge

She was making something useless, her gaze vacant.

Perhaps it wasn’t completely useless to Shadow Gale, but since she wouldn’t explain anything, it was just an incomprehensible device, like a machine or an avant-garde art piece or something, with a tangled mess of tubes and cords and several gauges glowing ridiculously, indicating some unknown values—at the very least, that’s how Deluge saw it.

Right now, she was grateful simply that Shadow Gale had something that she was invested in. Deluge didn’t see Shadow Gale as someone very uniquely precious and irreplaceable, but rather as something she’d been entrusted with by another. If something happened to her, Pfle might crawl up from the depths of hell. Even if it was impossible, Pfle seemed capable of it.

Deluge had inherited Pfle’s estate. That was what had enabled her to survive all this time. Shadow Gale was included in the estate. In fact, Shadow Gale was the main item. She couldn’t abandon

Shadow Gale.

Pfle's goal had been freedom from the Magical Kingdom. She'd wanted to sever all the systems involved with magical girls from the Magical Kingdom and seize them herself. Even if a fight came up in the process, she'd believed that was the safest option for Shadow Gale.

Deluge thought that if she'd been in the same position, if she'd been aiming for something that outrageous, if she'd known that reaching that point would mean all her friends would be safe, then surely she would have gone for the same thing. She wouldn't have been able to write it off as impossible.

While checking on how Shadow Gale was doing out of the corner of her eye, Deluge worked on the task at hand. She was gathering evidence on the magical girls who attended the magical-girl class. She had to strip every one of them bare—to see if their backgrounds were trustworthy, and if they weren't, to find out their real backgrounds.

The calculating device that Pfle had left behind looked like a joke: It was an old-fashioned monitor reminiscent of a CRT with thick cables connecting it to both a keyboard and an armful-sized metal square. But its functionality was no joke at all.

To search, this calculation device referenced not only official information from records but the private: references on magical-girl social media by personal acquaintances, posts on anonymous message boards by those who seemed like the person concerned, and things like that. You'd set the superficial information, and from there you had the machine derive from that to go deeper and deeper. The search would cover information on the network as well as printed documents, handwritten memos, or even carvings—all texts expressed since recorded history would be included. It was magic in the correct sense.

After inheriting this from Pfle, seeing this stupidly large machine and thick operation manual, Deluge had initially felt overwhelmed. This was so far and away from Catherine and Brenda's field of expertise, so she had assumed she couldn't expect any sort of support and she would have to do everything on her own. But when they'd actually started it, the pair had operated Pfle's machines like it was nothing, firing in strings of characters, which Deluge didn't even recognize, to do something or other. To Deluge, who had been getting through the work with constant

reference to the manual, it was completely magic.

Everything about them, from their manner, language, and looks, had made Deluge assume they were younger and to be cared for, but now she realized that had been a mistake. The way the three sisters communicated in shrieks, chitters, and cries that weren't words might actually be an exchange of information much harder and denser than it appeared.

After they became able to operate the machine, Deluge stopped treating them like kids for a while. She tried approaching them not with language for younger girls but for people of her grade level. She'd figured if it seemed they didn't like it, then she would go back to before. But the attitude of the trio didn't change, and they didn't touch on the change in Deluge at all. Before long, she went back to before.

In the end, Deluge wondered if maybe she'd been thinking about it too hard. It was something like her inborn nature to worry about relationships, and even if she had made the decision to not stress about the small things in life, she still couldn't quite fix it. Besides, there was one more thing. Thinking about it now, Deluge had one other magical-girl acquaintance who hated being treated like a child. Even if she thought it in her head—because she *was* a child—when you treated her like a child, Princess Tempest had gotten into a very apparent bad mood. The way she would puff up her cheeks and pout her lips had indicated most clearly that she was a child, but if you pointed that out, it would just make her angrier, so Quake had consoled her, and when Inferno had tried to tease her, Prism Cherry had stopped her—anyhow, things had always been lively.

Even if it had been unconscious, maybe she had been placing the trio in a Tempest-like role. Deluge didn't talk about this to anyone, but she reflected and reconsidered as all the while she continued with her task. The profiles of the girls who attended the magical-girl class gradually exposed their public sides, but the hidden areas she most wanted to know wouldn't quite come up. A clumsy search would stir up trouble. Deluge was ultimately an amateur, and all that she had going for her were the various types of devices she'd inherited from Pfle and her magical girl-level typing speed. She couldn't get overconfident with this machine when she was using it without even understanding how it worked.

She was slowly inching her way along bit by bit, with progress

coming slowly but surely, when one day, a message came to her magical phone. Since she didn't take messages from anyone but Snow White, of course she assumed it was from her and picked up her phone. Seeing the message, her eyes widened, and when Brenda and Catherine looked over at her with concern, she held them back with a hand. After taking a deep breath, she dropped her eyes to the phone. The text hadn't changed.

She'd gotten a message from an unfamiliar address claiming to be from "the magical girl who used to be Bluebell Candy."

◇ 0 Lulu

Lulu rolled over in bed. Being a magical girl, she didn't need sleep. Taking a break was just a pretext for being lazy. Her entire field of view was filled by cheap wallpaper. Outside her window was just the wall of the next-door building anyway, so in the end, no matter where she looked, it was just walls—a dead end. It was as if nothing was going in the right direction.

Being ordered to accompany Ripple in the first place had just not worked out. This had come from her master, after all. Lulu hadn't sworn absolute loyalty to her, so maybe the old woman was thinking that if Lulu died due to some mistake, then there was nothing to be done about that.

The further the stages advanced, the more difficult Ripple's pointless avoidance of killing became. Lulu wished she would just not drag in ordinary people who had nothing to do with her. It was the worst kind of selfishness to say you didn't want to kill your enemies in a life-and-death situation.

Maybe Ripple's individual strength had been a small help in carrying out that selfishness. But the reality was that Ripple couldn't afford to be selfish anymore. It wasn't about wins or losses—they were no longer able to get a handle on the enemy movements. Of course. Frederica wouldn't leave everything as is if she had any brains at all.

Lulu rolled over again. She could see Ripple's back, sleeping on the other bed. Of course, like Lulu, she was still in magical-girl form.

Her attitude hadn't changed at all. It wasn't anything so simple as being unable to see any desire to cooperate in Ripple. It fit better

to say that she was being forced to work with an enemy. It was very much the tendency of that type of magical girl to be arrogant about her own righteousness, thinking there was no need to speak with those who had a different set of values. Thinking about it made her feel ready to burp. Lulu had thought Ripple had received some mental adjustment from Lazuline the Third—so then she wished she'd done something about this stubbornness.

But right now, Lulu had no options. If it was her job to make nice as much as possible with some crazy ninja girl, then she had no choice but to do the work.

Now she rolled onto her back and opened her palm by her face, fiddling with the little rock she'd been holding in her palm. It was the pale, clear color of the sky, and hit by the outside light that seeped through the windows, it glowed dully.

Apatite. It was a good rock for a worthless kind. It meant *bonds*. She'd strengthened it with her magic, thinking it would help to get along with Ripple, but really considering it now, the word "bonds" didn't mean only good bonds, and there were some bonds it was better not to have at all. For example, there was the bond between Ripple and Frederica.

Basically, relationships were all hard and all trouble. *How happy would I be if I could avoid getting involved in such things and just live loving beautiful and pretty things*, she thought with a sigh as she rolled the apatite in her palm. Ripple, lying beside her, was awake anyway, and though she did feel bad for making her listen to her sighs, she *should* hear that much, at least.

Lulu stirred. Her magical phone got a notification and vibrated. She picked up her phone and tapped at it, and when she learned the information that had just come in, she sat bolt upright in bed.

It had been decided that the magical-girl class would participate in the Umemizaki Junior High Founding Festival. Frederica's goal was to invade ruins under the school and steal a relic, so the odds were high that she would see this as a lucky opportunity. Their inclusion in the Founding Festival may have been to influence the transfer student Snow White.

This information probably came from Ranyi. O Lulu felt like there were a lot of strangely subjective turns of phrase. She read over the text one more time, and feeling a puff at her ears, she turned around, and there was Ripple's face, close enough that their lips could touch.

Startled, she cried out and leaped back, but Ripple maintained the distance and followed her, grabbing her lapels. Lulu had learned enough martial arts to avoid embarrassing herself as a Lazuline candidate, but suddenly twisting her arm or pulling away Ripple's fingers didn't even come to mind. She was at Ripple's mercy, strangled by her collar.



Ripple's expression was frightening enough that even O Lulu, who had experienced enough real combat to be sick of it, who had killed and almost been killed, felt overwhelmed. Reflecting the slight light from the outside, her right eye was reminiscent of blazing flame—no, it was more like a ruby—glaring at Lulu as she said with a groan, “What’s going on...?”

“Huh? What, what do you mean?”

“You said Snow White is in the magical-girl class.”

“Huh? You didn’t know?” Lulu responded honestly without thinking. She regretted that, thinking that she could have hidden it or covered it—she could have dealt with it in other ways—but the honesty of her reaction seemed to suddenly ease Ripple’s anger. Her hands on Lulu’s collar relaxed, and she tossed Lulu down on the bed onto her knees. The bed runner wafted up, blocking her vision for a moment.

Ripple turned her back without a word and headed straight for the door—Lulu panicked and grabbed Ripple by the shoulder to stop her. When Ripple turned around, her whole face was ruby red, like a manifestation of her earlier anger, and though Lulu’s heartbeat was thudding in her chest, she didn’t draw back this time, taking that look with comparative calm.

“Where are you going?” Lulu demanded.

“You’re all trash.”

“Huh?”

“Where I go is none of your business.”

“It is my business. Listen, if you went to the magical-girl class now, you would just cause Snow White trouble.”

The rage that had been blazing up in Ripple visibly darkened.

Lulu could tell she was flinching and couldn’t hide it as she continued to press Ripple. “I understand that you’re mad. I’m angry, too. It was important information that you hadn’t heard that Snow White had transferred in, and that was clearly deliberately hidden from me. That I never got the order not to tell you has to mean that.”

Lulu hugged Ripple around the shoulders. She had thought that Ripple might push her away, but Ripple’s shoulders just trembled a bit, and Lulu was privately relieved.

“Let’s both offer what we know. I feel like both of us have

gotten to this point based on assumptions of what the other is like. It would be meaningful just to make sure the other person really is like that. For starters, just so you know, I won't lie. You're free to lie or not, and you can choose not to believe me, but I'll just say this—I won't lie."

It wasn't at all a lie that she was angry. Her master had kept certain information from Ripple, and she hadn't ordered Lulu not to tell these things to Ripple. She most likely would have anticipated a situation like this—in other words, her master had schemed to make it so they had to talk about their true feelings to make them get closer. Lulu felt like she could see her master behind this, chuckling to herself; but getting closer to Ripple was effective, so Lulu simply obeyed. It was vexing.

Ripple glared at Lulu, and seeing Ripple like that, Lulu glared back at her in the same way.

Lulu nonchalantly put her left hand to her chest. Her pulse was still a little fast. Ripple really had made her heart pound so hard she'd thought it would stop just now.

CHAPTER 5

CAREFUL PREPARATIONS

◇ Thunder-General Adelheid

The school had a certain atmosphere at night. And then with the elegance of the old school building, too, it doubled that air. But things were a little different right now. Since the homunculus incident, Adelheid had continued to consistently patrol once a week in search of weaknesses in the security—or conversely for places where the security was tightest, although the atmosphere had since changed.

Adelheid did a wide circle of the school building clockwise, and then another circle counterclockwise. She wasn't about to be stupid and get too close. That would leave clear proof on the security cameras. Even a magical girl couldn't fool those. Being from the Magical Kingdom, they would have made sure that they could capture magical girls as well.

There were no homunculi. Adelheid had observed the homunculi over the course of her many night watches—their humidity in the air, their scent and sound—so she could sense their presence at least.

Adelheid had heard that since they couldn't just keep using as is a system that had caused an incident, the Lab had retrieved everything. Most likely, the dead technician had been blamed for it all. The Lab might feel suspicious about things as well, but not only would they feel inferior enough that they wouldn't want to speak too loudly about it, the Information Bureau was the magical-girl class's backer. If it came to a fight, then both parties would have to get serious. So they had to sheathe their weapons.

Adelheid put her hand over the hilt of her military saber. She curved her fingers lightly.

Even within the same faction—rather, precisely because it was the same faction—the power relations in this area were terribly complex. A stopgap security camera system was installed as the new defense matrix, and it was a very fragile security system compared to the homunculi security net. And apparently, it would take more time for new homunculi to be deployed from the Lab.

That was delightful news for a sneak thief. It wasn't simply that the security had gotten thinner—the internal squabbling within the Osk Faction also scored highly. She seemed to recall that someone from the Archfiend Cram School had once said it was easier to get in and make a theft when there were quarrels in the house.

This was all too convenient, right back to the start of things—that incident of unknown cause. It was uncanny. If Adelheid were in the position of a sneak thief, she would actually lose the urge to steal.

“What are you looking at?”

The voice that came at her back made Adelheid hesitate in her reaction. She had been aware of the other's presence, although she hadn't thought they would call out to her. But if she kept silent forever, it would reveal that she was unsure of how to respond. And that wasn't very cool.

After another second's pause, she said what she was honestly thinking. “Ah'm surprised ya'd talk to me.”

“Why? I'm allowed to talk, at least.” The speaker—Princess Lightning—trotted right up alongside Adelheid.

The fingers of Adelheid's right hand on the hilt of her military saber twitched completely on their own. “Most people'd find it awkward.”

“Why?”

“We did have that fight here at night.”

“Oh, did that happen?”

“Ah hit ya in the head and knocked ya out.”

“I don't recall that.”

“So ya lost yer memories from that hit?”

“I *do* recall that I ran into you at school at night once. But that time, I left the school completely fine, didn't I?”

Adelheid was struck silent. Adelheid had punched Princess Lightning and sent her flying, but after being flung into the bushes, for some reason she had stood up again without a single injury and run away from the school totally fine.

“So? Am I wrong? I wasn’t injured; in other words, there was no fight. If you say that I lost in a territory fight, then I won’t show up at your evening patrols, but if that’s not what happened, then we have something else.”

Adelheid licked her lower lip with the tip of her tongue. Lightning’s voice was just as calm as when she was peacefully being a classmate at school during the day. Looking beside her, Adelheid saw Lightning giving her a thin smile.

“Sayin’ we never fought... That’s just unreasonable.”

“It’s not unreasonable. There was no fight at all—in fact, I believe you and I can become friends. Recall the time of the homunculus incident. I think we made quite a nice combination, don’t you? Sally said it was like *Cutie Healer*, and I was a little curious, so I went to a rental shop to borrow the Blu-rays, but there were so many of them, I didn’t know where to start.”

Feeling that if she let her keep talking, then she would just be taken in, Adelheid said a little louder, “So?” cutting off what Lightning was making seem like idle chatter. “What are ya tryin’ to say?”

Lightning’s expression went from faintly subtle to what would be perfectly described as a broad grin. The fingers of Adelheid’s right hand twitched again. It wasn’t a movement so much as a tremble in order to keep from moving.

“Even if we do wind up in conflict, I believe we can work together before we get there. We don’t seem all that incompatible. Hey, don’t you think that’s a good idea?”

“Work together...on what?”

“I want you to slow down the invasion of the magical-girl class.”

That made Adelheid turn to look at her. Her right hand firmly clasped her hilt so she could draw it at any moment.

Lightning was entirely unruffled, continuing to speak as if Adelheid hadn’t moved at all. “Even if you don’t have the ultimate power of decision-making, lots of things can change depending on how you report them, am I right? If you report that now isn’t the time, this is definitely a trap, then they will naturally be dealing with things differently.”

“...Now why would Ah do that?”

“I told you. We’re going to cooperate. Even if we ultimately decide to fight, right now, why not act to both parties’ benefit?”

Continuing to struggle against each other won't benefit either of us. We'd both lose."

Adelheid had also been suspecting that the security was too thin, this was too convenient, wasn't this a trap? But if Lightning was telling her not to do anything yet—now *that* felt like the trap. She could just envision the hopeless sight: their activity being curbed through Adelheid while the camp that was moving Lightning marched into the magical-girl class to do as they pleased at their goal point with no rivals on hand.

"Even if we don't take action, there's no guarantee you folks won't," said Adelheid.

"We have different goals. If you don't do anything, then we won't, either. You haven't been told that?"

Adelheid's brow furrowed. She was aware that she had already been told some outrageous stuff, but this magical girl in front of her—one who had abandoned common sense, Princess Lightning—was talking about something even more outrageous than what Adelheid was thinking, wasn't she?

Before Adelheid could ask anything back, Lightning bounded hard off the ground, and with a single leap, flew over the baseball backstop. "See you at school tomorrow, then," she said before disappearing.

Adelheid didn't move from her spot as she watched her go. Even after she was entirely gone, she couldn't quite bring herself to move again, and by the time she got going, she was taking off her military hat, combing her hair up with her hands, and putting her hat back on. Not even knowing herself why she was doing that, she sighed deeply.

◇ Mephis Pheles

Running up to the roofs, leaping from telephone pole to telephone pole, with her long black hair and skirt fluttering, she raced along the iron railing on a high-rise, her magical girl body moving with energy that she didn't feel in her heart. Before long, she arrived at the apartment complex where she lived.

She undid her transformation in the dark and stood at the entrance of the apartment complex, placing her schoolbag at her feet and clapping her cheeks with both hands. Going up the stairs,

in front of her apartment, she made a fist, tensed her gut, and turned the doorknob. The door made a grating noise as it opened, and the smell of meat flowed out from within.

"I'm home."

"Welcome back. What good timing. I just finished cooking."

Though Mephis had taken it for granted in life that she'd get no response upon coming home, now if she called out, she got a reply. Her roommate Kana wore an apron over her uniform and held up a large steaming plate.

"Today I stir-fried some meat and vegetables," Kana said.

"That's the same as yesterday."

"It's appropriate feed for a starving wolf."

"If you're dying to use lines from a manga that much, choose a better situation."

Being that Kana was straight out of prison and of unclear origins, when Mephis had been ordered to let her live with her, she'd assumed it would be a living hell. But now that things were like this, she'd come to feel like it actually wasn't so bad. She still didn't know who Kana was, but it seemed like she wasn't really a bad person. Even if she had done something bad enough to be put in prison, that just meant it was bad for the Magical Kingdom, and it wasn't necessarily that she was a villain by human standards. She typically seemed so dim-witted and not at all like a criminal, and she also had the strength of heart to risk her life to save a friend in a dangerous situation.

After gargling and washing her hands, Mephis set up her folding low table, Kana wiped the table with a cloth and set out plates and chopsticks, and the two of them sat down facing each other and put their hands together.

"Thank you for the food," said Mephis.

"Got all my prey lined up right here..."

"I said to pick the right time for lines."

Kana was into some manga. And she was really into it. She wanted to use lines she'd learned from manga at every opportunity, but it was difficult to say that was going well. But even if Mephis pointed out every time that she wasn't using them right, she didn't expect Kana would fix it.

But Mephis wasn't honestly that annoyed. She thought it was weird to want to use manga lines in your everyday life when you were a second-year in middle school, but a little while ago, Kana

hadn't even known manga existed.

Being exposed to manga culture had left Kana so moved, she had become absorbed in reading it. Mephis could imagine that had moved her as deeply as eating your first sweets since you were born or seeing color for the first time or other similar first experiences. Most of all, it was always fun to see someone get into something that you loved.

"I hear there is a holy land known as a manga café," Kana said.

"Yeah, I think there's one or two in the city here, like net cafés."

"I would like to go to one sometime."

"It's not free."

"You better not be saying to put a collar on wolves like us."

"It's not a collar, okay. You just have to pay money. Your criminal history better not be something boring like eating and running."

"I can't deny the possibility."

Looking at Kana expressionlessly chewing on her stir-fried vegetables, Mephis thought, *I just don't get her*, as well as, *I need to teach this girl*. It was bad enough that she'd never even read manga before, so of course she had no common sense. But despite that, she had a weird tendency to take action, and she'd be doing something strange before you even knew what was going on. She had proactively involved herself with Umemizaki Junior High, leading to them joining in on the Founding Festival. Only Kana would have done that. Any of the others' behavior would have been curtailed by their natural sense of responsibility, the thought that their actions might cause others trouble.

Kana wasn't a bad person. In fact, she could be cute—but her erratic behavior meant Mephis couldn't take her eyes off her. That was how Mephis saw Kana now. The best words to express it would be "younger sister." Basically, someone you had to take care of. But if she said that out loud, Kana would take it and run with it, so Mephis kept it to herself.

"Wasn't today supposed to be the sale date for the latest edition?" said Kana.

"It's just that the sale date came early last week because of the long weekend. Tomorrow's when it's on sale."

"That's too bad."

Mephis didn't live solely on her emotions so much as other

people thought she did. Sometimes she worried deeply, and she would properly reflect on things, too. It was just that she often couldn't control her feelings.

Thinking of the words "little sister" forced her to remember an old mistake she'd made.

The more she thought about it, the more she figured she had screwed up with Tetty. Living with Kana had caused those feelings to get bigger and bigger. Even if she had thought of herself as the younger sister, so what? Tetty had her own life, and even if Mephis was the little sister, that didn't mean that she couldn't surpass her big sister. That just meant that the big sister was gutless for being surpassed. Tetty could be insensitive sometimes, but on the whole, Mephis was at fault. And the worst part was that she knew that but couldn't make up with her.

As head of her Elite Guard team and leader of Group Two in the magical-girl class, she had to put her own honor first—plus, always maintaining her aggression would heighten her whole group's morale and strengthen their feelings of solidarity. People wouldn't follow a weak boss. She had seen plenty of examples of the timidity of the leadership causing bad things to happen.

So Mephis would always be aggressive, and she couldn't let herself think of it as a bad thing. She'd thought she understood that, but now Mephis was forcing herself. Not over Tetty. This was about what had happened today after they'd been summoned. Kana had asked her about things she couldn't talk about, and then she was pretending that she hadn't asked that at all.

"That reminds me," said Kana.

"What?"

"About that summons to the headquarters."

"Ahh, that's not really a big deal."

"I see. Then fine. I just thought you had been ordered something by Yoshioka."

"Who's Yoshioka? I dunno them."

The one who had summoned Mephis was not Yoshioka but a magical girl called Pythie Frederica.

Mephis had entered the magical-girl class to gather information on orders from somewhere about three levels above the Elite Guard. She couldn't at all say she was a respectable student, and she had felt guilty about it, but she'd heard that all the students here had some kind of backer and that they were all living this lifestyle at

school by the wishes of said backers, so she'd concluded that was just how it worked and did her job.

But the summons this time was completely different from the ones before. She was supposed to attack the magical-girl class for the sake of their ultimate goal: to steal a relic from the ruins underneath the school. This was nothing like sneaking in to steal it. This was direct terrorism. It would mean hurting the classmates with whom she'd been living until just a day ago, laughing and competing and sharing manga. She'd be destroying the class itself.

Mephis wasn't in a position to consider what she should do. She had only to do what she was ordered. She understood this, but her heart was in turmoil. Even if she ate her stir-fried vegetables with a cool look that said it was nothing, even if she made comebacks to every one of Kana's brainless remarks, it didn't feel like her, and she couldn't calm down at all.

"Mephis."

"What?"

"If there's something on your mind, I'll listen."

That made Mephis gulp down the meat she was in the middle of chewing and cough, taking her cup in hand to wash the food down. "Where's this coming from? There's nothing on my mind."

"I would be glad to hear that...but you seem a little different from usual."

Mephis looked back at Kana. She was expressionless as usual. Mephis couldn't read what she was thinking.

"Whaddaya mean, I seem different? You're being weird."

"As a member of Group Two, I have the obligation to take care of my fellow members. I won't overlook even subtle changes in the group leader. Yes, in other words, it wouldn't be an overstatement to say that I'm a parental figure to Group Two."

Mephis looked back at Kana again. Her expression hadn't changed. She didn't look like she was joking.

"Parental figure...? Come on, how old are you?"

"I don't remember."

Maybe the reason she was so stubborn about keeping transformed was because of age. Judging that it would do no good to dig into it further, Mephis scarfed down her white rice.

After school, while going through her daily routine of magical girl activities—that day was picking up trash—Tetty tried thinking back on her own behavior.

She hadn't been able to think about anything else that day, ever since the afternoon class. It was about Snow White. She was glad that Snow White would speak with her in a friendly way, but Tetty had wound up blabbing on about what she knew, and she couldn't help feeling like she had said too much.

Just bringing up the name of the Information Bureau would make Miss Calkoro stand up straight, and the department would obviously know lots of confidential information. And being that Snow White was a watchman of the law who hunted bad magical girls, it wouldn't be strange for her to be investigating the Information Bureau.

She had a mild air to her, and didn't look at all as if she were thinking scary things, which was exactly why Tetty had spoken about lots of things she knew, even telling her about her nickname of Satou—but Satou was affiliated with the Information Bureau, so was it really okay to have told her that?

She thought she hadn't said anything that would really be a problem, but that was just Tetty's opinion. She could imagine that she had actually leaked something important. Looking at Satou, it didn't seem like something that would cause the mage trouble to talk about, but even so, Satou was with the Information Bureau. Tetty still didn't know what the Information Bureau did, but she was cognizant that it was an important department. Surely that wasn't wrong.

While dividing up steel and aluminum cans, she decided: *Tomorrow, I'm going to tell Satou what happened today and apologize.*

◇ Kumi-Kumi

There were more things in Kumi-Kumi's room lately. It wasn't that it was messy and she had to clean up. Living in an apartment that she was just borrowing for a while, she had been doing with only the minimum, thinking that barren was fine. But now she'd figured that was no good and had come to decorate the room with things.

Small desks, potted plants, dolls, side tables—they had all been made by Kumi-Kumi's magic, so they were all angular in shape, but

she had figured that was fine for what it was, since it made the room look cohesive.

Aside from that, now she always had drinks and snacks on hand. Before, she'd only ever needed barley tea, but she'd left that dull lifestyle behind, increasing her options. Now she could say, *"Would you like coffee or black tea, or perhaps orange juice? And have some chocolates with that."*

There was one reason for all this—to deal with Frederica, who had shown up all of a sudden. She had appeared with some frequency for a time after the homunculus incident, so to keep from embarrassing herself further and so that she could do her best to play host, Kumi-Kumi had gradually remade the style of this room—rather, her whole lifestyle.

But the more hospitality Kumi-Kumi had arranged for, the less frequently Frederica had visited. Frederica had been coming by almost every day a mere week after the incident occurred, but over this past week, Kumi-Kumi hadn't heard a word from her. She didn't know why. Perhaps Frederica was busy. It couldn't be because she was sick of her—though it did seem like she was a whimsical person, so Kumi-Kumi wound up thinking that wasn't out of the question, either.

It wouldn't be strange for anything to happen in the future. Frederica was the sort Kumi-Kumi had thought might easily be arrested or lose her position, but she'd never imagined her presence would evaporate so suddenly. It wasn't that Kumi-Kumi liked her, but this did wind up feeling rather lonely. It felt empty that the small articles and the drinks and snacks she'd gotten had totally gone to waste, and she wondered if maybe she should invite over one of her classmates instead. Since she still didn't know when Frederica might come, she wouldn't let her guard down.

◇ **Pythie Frederica**

Comparing with the information Mephis and Adelheid had shared with her, Frederica found out that during the incident when the homunculi went out of control, there had been some time where Kumi-Kumi had been on her own. In defending Kumi-Kumi by the surprise attack from Bella Lace's magic, Kana had been sacrificed—though Frederica had saved her—and Kumi-Kumi had gone

searching for her classmates for help, then found them.

The time Kumi-Kumi had been wandering around until finding the others equaled time alone. It was highly likely that someone had kidnapped her, and a replacement had occurred during this interval.

So then who had done it?

That incident in the wilderness had definitely been a scene of carnage. There had been no guarantee that even competent magical girls would survive. The area had been packed with an incredible number of hostile homunculi, and one of them had been an inferior copy of a magical girl. And even if they were inferior, she'd heard that Grim Heart and the Musician of the Forest had been among them, and they said even Pukin, the source of Frederica's worries, had been there.

If they'd managed to kidnap Kumi-Kumi in that situation, then they weren't merely strong. They were the very individuals who had created the situation. They had been able to move freely because they'd been guaranteed not to be attacked by homunculi. In fact, if they had the homunculi help, then they could handle someone like Kumi-Kumi.

She didn't think it was Lazuline the First. Two of her subordinates had been in the firing line, and one of them had gone to the hospital. The chances that this was a pretense weren't zero. But Frederica thought it was unlikely.

If it wasn't the First, then the staff of the magical-girl class? There were two mages on staff. Calkoro and Halna. Frederica had gotten the report that Calkoro had been fighting with the students. So then Halna?

She'd originally figured that it was the Osk Faction—since it was the Osk Faction that had such excellent homunculus tech, and the magical-girl class was using them. The situation was suspicious, and if they had the opportunity, even someone other than Frederica would doubt them.

Assuming that the most likely candidate for culprit who had replaced Kumi-Kumi was the magical-girl class and Halna, then next she would consider the presence of Pukin.

Regarding the sense of Pukin's presence—she had continued to visit that place of attack several times, only to find nothing she could be sure of as *this is Pukin*. But it wasn't as if she found *this isn't Pukin*, either. All she could find felt lacking.

Since the odds were significant this was a trap for luring her out, she couldn't freely visit any scene or stay there long. Frederica fundamentally kept her behavior low-key, unable to inspect things thoroughly herself, and was forced to leave things to others to a degree. However, as with the matter of Kumi-Kumi, Frederica's personal senses were required for these sorts of delicate and subtle matters. If she hadn't done it herself, it would have taken even more time to confirm that Lillian had changed.

Pythie Frederica saw Pukin not only as psychological trauma, but as a reliable ally, a friend she could respect, and a magical girl to be loved. Even if their association had been short, her feelings for Pukin ran the gamut. She couldn't quite put her finger on what reminded her of Pukin, but it was there nonetheless.

As the number of attacks decreased, in the end, Frederica was unable to come to any conclusions, and naturally, the number of her inspections decreased as well. The magical-girl class had used a homunculus of Pukin—so would her top suspect there be Halna? But that didn't feel right. So then who was it? Pukin.

"That's not it, though," Frederica grumbled to herself.

◇ **Snow White**

Adelheid, in the outfield, flung a pass to Mephis in the infield, who used her hair tail to pass to Kumi-Kumi in the outfield. It then went to Lillian in the infield, and from Lillian's woven net it was tossed to Mephis like a sling before continuing to Adelheid in a flowing exchange of throws. Rappy, who was sitting in the bleachers with Snow White, muttered, "They've practiced quite a bit."

Group Two, which didn't have the ball, responded to the flowing exchange of passes by running around the small field, but gradually their formation started to fall apart. Particularly quick ones like Ranyi aside, no one else could respond to their passes.

That was when Mephis yelled, "I'm gonna throw it!"

Mephis didn't have the ball. Everyone knew she was just saying it, and she couldn't throw anything, but all at once, the gallery and participants and everyone's attention was focused on her. Mephis's magic wouldn't allow anyone to ignore her, even if it was for a brief time.

Diko's form had already fallen apart, and Adelheid threw the

ball full power at her back—but the speedball flew through empty air. A beat later, Diko appeared in the space where the ball had passed through. She had avoided it with her magic.

“That’s cheating, Diko!” Mephis yelled, but nobody paid attention to her.

Pshuke in the outfield from Group Three, who had stolen the ball, passed into the infield, but Mephis leaped in from the side, stretching her hair tail out as much as she could to grab it. But she failed to get it, and the ball rolled on the ground. When you looked closely at Mephis’s tail, which had touched the ball, and at the ball itself, it was gleaming bright. Pshuke had covered the ball with the lubricant fired from her water gun and then passed it lightly, making Mephis drop it when she intercepted it.

“Mephis, out!”

“Shit! That’s cheating, Pshuke!”

The ball returned to Group Two and passed from Sally to Adelheid and from Adelheid to Kana. Kana did a big wind-up and threw the ball, but for such fine form, the throw was lacking much force or speed, and Lightning caught it with a smile.

“Give it a little more of a legit throw!” Adelheid cried.

“But if I threw it at full power and it connected, it would massively damage its target,” Kana pointed out.

“That’s the kind of game this is!” Lightning said.

Lightning passed to Sally, and Sally threw the ball up high enough to skim the ceiling, where her crow caught it firmly in both feet. It circled, gradually descending, to aim for the Group Two infielders running around.

“Sally, that’s cheating!”

“You keep saying that, Mephis. Can’t you think of anything else to babble on about?”

“Damn you, Lightning! Come and get me!”

Rappy shook her head and muttered, “Group Three’s pretty wild.”

Miss Ril commented softly, “We’re going next.”

Tetty responded in an even softer voice, “How about we strategize?”

Dory and Arlie both made a lot of noise together. They suggested attacking with the drill, hitting, and kicking—all their strategies were violent and didn’t seem useful.

While chiding the two of them, Snow White was listening to the

voices of the heart. Despite being in the middle of a dodgeball game, none of the girls were actually immersed in it. As they threw and evaded the ball, their daily issues were popping up in their minds. Snow White listened in on those. In class, they were always human and didn't transform, so rec time was a hard-to-come-by opportunity for them to be transformed in front of everyone without holding back anything.

Frederica had sent in Group Two to try to rob a relic from the ruins, and all of those sent in had figured out that the central courtyard was an important spot. That was because there was no place aside from that courtyard that seemed like it could be an entrance to the ruins. And the courtyard was securely cordoned off. The only people who could go in were Tetty, who used it to get to school, and the janitor, whom she didn't quite know. Being generally in charge, the principal would most likely also be able to enter, but Snow White hadn't heard anything about the courtyard from the voice of her heart.

Groups Two and Three were investigating the courtyard, and their problem was trying to somehow get in. Some were thinking about forcing their way in when Tetty was coming to or leaving the school, but that would be difficult. Since there was a spell cast on the seal at the entrance, it wouldn't work like a sneak thief following a resident to get in through the auto lock.

The documents they had seized from the Puk Faction also had record of the ruins. All that they had said was "Puk Puck considered their use in her plans, then gave up on it. The power of the ruins is strong enough that it can be felt from the outside, but the ruins are also highly dangerous."

So Snow White knew that the ruins were dangerous enough to give up on use, but she couldn't get a read at all on what specifically would happen. The Puk Faction documents had some deficiencies—or rather, they were nothing but deficient. As long as Puk Puck understood what was in them, then nothing else had mattered. But now that she was gone, no one could answer any questions about these documents.

Based on that information, Snow White could more or less see how the school courtyard felt off. Sealed by a barrier, her magic wouldn't reach it, either. But despite that, for some reason, you could clearly feel its presence. It even felt as if it were inviting you. It was odd.

Snow White had tried an experiment with Arlie. From each edge of the school building, with the courtyard between them, they tried to see how the magic would work. What they had found out was that when you had the courtyard between you, the magic twisted. It became hard to hear each other, as if there was an echo. When she even got a ringing in her ears, Snow White undid her transformation. It didn't get that bad if you didn't have the courtyard between you, so there had to be something more than the barrier.

Tetty used that route to get to school. Why would the magical-girl class have her do something like that? Snow White couldn't hear anything about that from the voice of Halna's heart. That was also odd.

And then there was Frederica. She knew the place was so dangerous that even Puk Puck had given up on it, and yet she was still trying to get into it. What was she trying to do, and how? Snow White couldn't even guess purely from reading the minds of Mephis and Adelheid, whom she knew had made contact with Frederica.

"Agh, it's over."

"We never did decide on a strategy."

"Let's do our best! We'll get through this on guts alone!"

"Fight, fight!"

"Destroy!"

A beat after the members of her group headed for their coats, Snow White stood up as well.

◇ Princess Deluge

Deluge wasn't under the management of the Magical Kingdom—she was what you'd call an unlicensed magical girl. So she couldn't use magical-girl public infrastructure like the gates for no reason. That meant that if she was going someplace far away, she either had to run there herself or ride a vehicle. And unlike regular magical girls, Deluge needed a supply of drugs in order to maintain her transformation. She couldn't transform too much, and if something was a certain distance away, she would have to take a plane or a train.

So for Deluge, long-distance travel meant the use of time and money. Someone who was aware of her circumstances wouldn't

pick a place to meet with her that was so far away. For example, when meeting up with Snow White, she would set the time and place at Deluge's convenience.

The café in a certain place in a prefecture that Lapis Lazuline had indicated as their meeting spot was far enough that Deluge needed to transfer through the bullet train. Rather than being angry at the other party for not showing any sort of consideration for her circumstances, she was kind of relieved. If she had been the magical girl Deluge knew, Bluebell Candy, then she would have made some attempt at consideration and then messed it up.

She swayed in the bullet train, making sure that she wouldn't miss her stop, and then got off at the designated station. From there, she walked. She waffled a little bit before she started walking but decided to go in human form. She figured going transformed would make Lazuline think she was ready for battle, and that time Snow White had suddenly undone her transformation in the underground lab had popped into her mind, and finally, she'd figured it would seem very unexpected.

Thinking about meeting Bluebell with a surprised look on her face was a little amusing.

She walked through a business district that was 30 percent countryside and 70 percent city, and she arrived in five minutes. Seeing the store frontage, Deluge muttered, "Hmm." It was quite different from what she'd anticipated. She'd kind of assumed that it would be a café with individual rooms suited to private talks, but the sign that had "Magical Teatime" written in a fancy font looked kind of cheap.

Calming her breath and steeling herself, she opened the door. A barista with a short mustache and a necktie turned to look at her with a lazy greeting of "Welcome." The interior of the café was decorated with paper chains, cases filled with figures, anime posters on the walls, bookshelves lined with anime magazines—it was like an otaku shop.

"Would you like to cosplay?" the barista asked.

"Oh, no...I'm fine. Actually, someone should be waiting for me..."

"Ohhh, over here, over here!"

She looked toward the voice to find a girl with a large and colorful Afro sitting there. She was sitting opposite a girl with green pigtails, talking about something. Both of them were magical girls.

“Not over there. Over here, over here.”

Just about hidden by the Afro, a blue magical girl was waving her hand. Deluge headed over there at a trot, following Bluebell, who was saying, “I got the private room at the back.”

As for what the private room was like, it wasn’t a lot different from the main café. It was lined with little *Cutie Healer* plushies, with a magical girl costume on a hanger. Bluebell took a seat and said, “Right then,” and looked at Deluge. Her expression was stern.

It wasn’t that she was upset not to get the look of surprise she’d expected. She was just disgruntled to get that look after the other party had ignored her own circumstances and called her all the way out here.

That had to mean, in the end, that she was not Bluebell. Of course. Deluge was the stupid one here for being disappointed. She looked back at Lazuline without any particular feeling.

“This is one of those cosplay cafés,” Lazuline explained. “It’s one of the few businesses where magical girls can have a get-together without detransforming.”

“Hmm.”

“A lot of magical girls love this place. And since it would be a problem if they caused a quarrel and couldn’t use this café anymore, there’s a tacit understanding that if enemies meet at this café, then they can’t fight... That’s sort of, like, the local rules here.”

“So that’s why it’s convenient for a secret talk?”

“Yeah, so you did understand that it was for a secret talk? So then that’s not a very good attitude.”

“...What isn’t?”

“Getting your buddy to keep a watch on us. I told you to come alone, didn’t I? Is your plan to use force to get your way if you have to? I can’t recommend that. I came alone, just as I promised, but I’m not going to lose so easily.”

Deluge went from expressionless to confused, looking back at her. The other girl wore a similar expression as she tilted her head. Deluge tilted her head, too.

“What do you mean?” Deluge asked.

“Come on, don’t give me that. You have your buddy standing by, right?”

“No, I don’t.”

“You’re going to play dumb? Yes, you do.”

“I told you, I don’t.”

“Huh? What? You’re telling me you haven’t noticed?”

Deluge stood up and transformed. Lazuline had said it was no problem to be in magical-girl form in this café. So she would be allowed to go in and out in this outfit. With that thought, she left the private room, headed right out of the store, and listened carefully. Unlike when she was human, there were things she would notice in magical-girl form.

Two minutes later, Deluge took Catherine and Brenda, who had been hidden behind a telephone pole, to Bluebell. They said they were worried, and when they’d heard she was going to a café, they’d thought they could have something good to eat—Deluge made them apologize; Bluebell was holding her stomach and laughing.

“Oh, sorry... Don’t get the wrong idea... I don’t mean it badly... but...mff! It’s just a little too funny... What’re you guys doing...? Pff! And Deluge was in human form, so she didn’t notice she was being tailed...seriously...aha...”

It took another five minutes until she was able to talk properly.

◇ Ripple

Kano Sazanami was aware that she was bad at talking. Generally, she would not be the one to initiate a conversation with someone. All through elementary, middle, and high school, she had never made friends, but that hadn’t really caused her problems. It was easier and less trouble to be alone, rather than with a group.

She also rarely initiated conversation with her family. Maybe she had, back before she could remember, but she didn’t recall anything of the sort. As far back as her memory went, she had never felt a need to speak with her family, comprised of only her annoying mother and her new stepfather.

Top Speed had repeatedly come to Ripple to talk. Ripple had mainly replied in tongue clicks, and she didn’t really recall responding in words. But Top Speed had stuck with her anyway, and now that she thought of it, Ripple had used that as a good excuse to not amend her attitude. Ripple had only realized that she had been a friend after she had died.

Ripple figured that the only reason she could speak relatively

normally with Snow White now was due to her regret about Top Speed. If she never said anything herself and then the other person disappeared one day, it would be too late to be thinking, *I should have talked about this*.

It wasn't as if she had gotten good at talking. She figured that she'd just learned that not talking was a disadvantage. She could be wrong.

Ever since getting split up from Snow White, she'd truly had fewer opportunities to talk. So speaking to Lulu had been the first time in a long time. Being at the level where she didn't know where to start, how she should express herself, or even how to move her mouth in the first place, Ripple had felt bewildered.

Lulu babbled on and on. She spoke about her childhood, which most likely there was no point in talking about. Her father, who had been using gems to commit a sort of fraud, had been taken away by some scary adults, and left behind; her mother, who had sold Lulu for money. Lulu had come to spend her days training with Lazuline the First, and so she didn't trust anyone, her master included, and nobody trusted her, either, and of course she couldn't become Lazuline, and she was forced to do work that was equivalent to picking up trash.

After getting that far, she gave Ripple an “*Oh!*” sort of look and quickly averted her eyes. She must have figured she'd said too much—since that “work equivalent to picking up trash” was, in other words, dealing with Ripple.

For some reason, Ripple wasn't angry. You could say that the way she'd said everything, without trying to conceal any part of it, had proven what she said. Besides, seeing Lulu belatedly realize what she'd said but being unable to backpedal was just so incredibly amusing, Ripple had to cover her laughter with a few throat-clearings. And the fact that she was the one trying to cover that just made it funnier for some reason, and Ripple added a few more throat-clearings.

She remembered that she also wasn't any good at listening to people. She hadn't talked for so long, she'd even forgotten that. By the time she digested what Lulu said and tried to understand it, the discussion was already moving on. She was desperate just to keep up.

Since Lulu had overshared, now Ripple had to do the same. Lulu hadn't hidden anything from Ripple, and Ripple didn't like

being the only one who kept things hidden. So she wound up talking about stuff she'd normally never bring up, like her family and what had happened during Cranberry's exam, and even the time when she'd been controlled by Frederica. If Lulu was talking, then she had to talk, too.

It was like punching back and forth. She got hit, so she hit back. Lulu had talked to her, so she talked back.

A few hours later, Lulu was lying on her back, legs hanging off the bed. The only thing coming from her mouth was not words but a groan.

Ripple's head was hanging, one hand on her forehead, sitting on her bed. She was sitting, somehow having kept herself from lying down. Her physical endurance was one thing, but her willpower was starting to run out.

She didn't know if she'd won or not. Had she done just what Lulu wanted? That was definitely true, so maybe she had lost. But in terms of Ripple's feelings, it felt closest to say she'd won at this game of punching back and forth.

She looked up at the ceiling. She didn't know if such a thing had eyes or not, but her eyes met with the sprinkler.

She'd been sick of herself for a long time.

Now she clearly understood that Frederica had been trying to make her angry, ever since her brainwashing had come undone. Ripple had completely fallen for it, and she'd been making for a reckless charge at Frederica when Lazuline had stopped her.

While Ripple had some fairly complicated feelings about that, she was more or less thankful to Lazuline. If she'd abandoned herself to emotions and charged in, she would have died. That surely would have made Frederica glad.

Ripple wanted to be sure to kill her. That was how she honestly felt about Frederica now.

Back when she hadn't been able to do anything and had been living like she was dead, she hadn't even been able to think something like this. But even now that this was all she thought about, things were basically the same. She wasn't dying, so she was alive. And since she was alive, there were things that she had to do. Snow White was still fighting. Pythie Frederica hurt so many people and made them suffer, just by her being alive. Ripple had been the one to give Snow White a means to fight. Ripple had also been the one to save Pythie Frederica, who would have been left to die.

If Top Speed had been there, maybe she would have said, “*Calm down a minute here, partner,*” and put a hand on her shoulder. But Top Speed was no longer with them. Ripple had remembered that while talking about Lulu.

There was nothing on Ripple’s shoulder. She had been living like a dead woman, so dying would also be easy. But rather than just dying, she should pick a way to die that would be at least somewhat meaningful. She would use her own life to destroy Pythie Frederica.

She had wasted time coming this far, but she had quickly gotten back her sense for battle. She would fight enemies. The stronger the enemy, the better. They were strong enemies—in other words, important to Frederica. Even if it was just pruning the branches, that was meaningful, too. She would fight, feeling all the while that she would be fine to die at this moment.

Frederica had been completely out of view before, but now, she was getting closer. At around the time when she could finally catch her back in sight, Ripple noticed a change in herself. Just being alive had hurt before, but now, things were different. Even moaning in a cheap business hotel, there was no pain.

She had understood the reason. It was 0 Lulu. She could be a little at ease because she was here.

Though Lulu was still highly suspicious, just by talking a little, Ripple’s feelings had changed in spite of herself. Like the time with Top Speed and the time with Snow White, they changed on their own.

CHAPTER 6

A CHANCE ENCOUNTER

◇ Sally Raven

It was decided that they would participate in the Founding Festival. That part was fine. The problem came after that. The principal had made a lot of proscriptions for their participation, and though Sally had anticipated this, it was restricting them quite a lot.

They were not to do anything against public order and morals, they were not to cause trouble for Umemizaki Junior High, its students or teachers, not to do anything that would make the school suspect they might be magical girls, they were to deal with matters with solidarity—that much was taken for granted, and Sally had no complaints with that.

Sally personally was very indignant about how they weren't allowed to use any copyrighted material—"that means no *Cutie Healer!*" But once she calmed down and mulled things over, she realized that this was the safer option, so she decided to swallow her anger. A few classmates were unhappy about the rule that they couldn't use their powers as magical girls, but Sally figured that counted as obvious. They were the ones borrowing the building, so they couldn't be doing whatever they pleased.

The problems came after that.

They were only allowed to go onto the sports field, and they weren't allowed inside the school building, which made her feel like, "*What are we even participating for?*" They weren't supposed to speak with the students and teachers of Umemizaki, either, which made it like, "*So if they talk to us, then we should ignore them?*" Finally, the statement that they were not even to deal with any food or drink had Princess Lightning smacking her desk with her palm.

Everyone there saw Lightning. But with all their eyes on her,

she had a cool look that said, “*Why are you looking at me?*” as she directed a palm toward Tetty, who was presiding over the meeting, prompting her to move on with the discussion.

Everyone was dissatisfied to a greater or lesser extent. If there was any difference among them, it was just whether they would say it out loud or not. The sisters Arlie and Dory shrieked their anger incessantly, Pshuke’s cursing increased in volume and depth, and those like Adelheid and Miss Ril, who were normally more well-behaved, were unable to pacify those around them—they even had troubled expressions themselves. And Mephis Pheles, who would normally be whining and complaining, remained silent for some reason—but still, she had to have some kind of concerns about this and not think well of the situation.

Of course, they did not reach a conclusion. The class meeting went through first period, then second period, using it up over nothing as Calkoro was still as a scarecrow, and Tetty gave up, thinking there was no longer anything to be done about this. But it wasn’t as if they’d given up participating in the Founding Festival.

They wrote out everything they didn’t like about the principal’s orders, making a written report of it that they decided to submit, which the whole class agreed on. To be more precise, Calkoro panicked and opposed it, but they made her back down, saying they wouldn’t cause her trouble and that they were taking responsibility for submitting it themselves, and once the report was done, it fell on Tetty to take it to the principal.

◇ Halna Midi Meren

Halna wanted to smack it and say, “*Don’t give me this nonsense!*” but she resisted the urge. She read over the sheets of paper she’d been handed three times, sighed, and felt dizzy at the greediness of magical girls.

Even just approving their participation in the Founding Festival with conditions had been a shockingly large concession, but now they were kicking up a fuss saying that they didn’t like those conditions. Halna figured they would never be satisfied, no matter what or how she gave them permission. Approval had just gotten them carried away. They continued to demand more, ever more new treats. They were incorrigible.

Summoning Calkoro, she had the teacher explain about how this paper had come to be submitted. She wanted to yell at her, but if she yelled now, then Calkoro would know that she was angry, and if she gave permission down the line, it would seem odd to her why Halna had permitted it when she was angry. So Halna maintained the best expressionless mask she could as she ordered dispassionately to “tell me only the facts.”

Calkoro was still frightened, but since she had never *not* been frightened to stand before Halna, the principal paid that no mind and had her speak. Halna had her explain who made what statements and how they responded, and then after having listened enough, she had Calkoro leave.

Once everyone else was gone, Halna smacked her desk with a fist.

“They’re all trash!”

Halna wasn’t concluding that all magical girls were trash. Magical girls were necessary to the Magical Kingdom, and some were perfectly capable and worthy of respect. But not every single one of them. In fact, there were more harmful ones than not. If they were just slacking in their training, that was on the better side—there were truly a lot who were pleased to use their magical-girl powers for illegal activity. While conversely, there were also those who didn’t know what to do with their talents and lived in obscurity. That was exactly why an organization for the sake of educating magical girls was needed.

When Halna had still been a newbie, she had been ordered to investigate into the Cranberry incident, and she had witnessed many, many tragedies of the sort that would make you want to cover your eyes. Magical girls like glittering stars who would surely have been great successes, had they survived, had fallen to those who excelled purely in combat ability and cunning.

The more she had investigated, the more depressed the incident had made her. She had seen her time with the investigation team only as a stepping stone to success, but instead it had triggered her to rethink magical girls. The dim-witted scouts had come to do a slightly better job, the number of magical girls increased, and there were more with powerful magic, but their mentalities weren’t keeping up. If a magical girl was strong but had a twisted heart, then it was better not to have her. At this rate, they would never make proper use of them.

Even the Cranberry incident had just been the tip of the iceberg. You couldn't at all say "It's been resolved, the case is closed, so it's over." They would raise magical girls' level of education by three levels, reduce the rate of all incidents, both surfaced and not surfaced, to less than 10 percent, and then finally make it zero.

It was with that thought that they'd taken advantage of the Puk Faction's failed plan, stealing the ruins that they had been maintaining to finally set up this magical-girl school—but then they had stumbled right from the first step. The school had not been the recipient of innocent and ignorant magical girls with hopeful futures, as Halna had envisioned. It had wound up becoming a gathering of good-for-nothing magical girls. The vanguard types sent in as a part of a plot to expand the interests of their factions weren't even the worst of them—there were scoundrels attending the school; covert operatives or actual terrorists were making like they were magical girls with righteous natures.

The vanguards and the covert operatives and the terrorists—all the students of the magical-girl class would think that they were the chosen ones. That was why they all wanted so badly to make things go as they pleased. *And on top of all that, they're submitting something like this*, she thought, hitting the sheets of paper on her desk with her fist.

Calkoro said that Snow White had not proactively agreed. That did feel like a bit of a saving grace. If the shining star of the magical-girl class joined in with the rabble and made a scene, that would cause problems.

But still, all these miserable...

Calkoro lifted her fist, took a deep breath, exhaled after a few seconds, and brought her fist down again. The magic desk would not be damaged by a mild impact, but even so, an educator should not be abandoning herself to her emotions and treating it roughly.

Opening her palm, she slowly lowered it, lifted up the papers, and brought them in front of her eyes. With her open left hand, she adjusted the position of her glasses frames, and while knowing the content was utterly foolish, she read over it. No matter how worthless the content of the text was, her magic glasses would show it to her clearly and crisply.

If she *was* to give them permission, she couldn't go suddenly approving everything. If a principal who was strict about

regulations gave in to the students' pressure, then it would be unnatural for it to be everything all of a sudden. Someone with an eye for it would have doubts. Already, some would have sniffed out that it was unnatural for Halna to have given permission for the Founding Festival.

Pythie Frederica and the Lapis Lazuline Faction would have noticed this irregularity and taken it as a good opportunity. The homunculus defense system was currently out of commission, and they were defended by security cameras alone. Even if the security cameras did find fault with them, they just had to finish their intrusion before the security team rushed in. And if you added the condition of the Founding Festival, a survey would be easy, and infiltration would be possible.

They would certainly be thinking that the conditions were too good for thieving, so it might be a trap. But still, if they thought that letting this chance go by would make it difficult for them to get the relic out of the underground ruins, then there was a 70 percent—no, an 80 percent chance that they would make their move. If Halna could lure them out by making it look like there was an opening here, then a little bit of irritation was a cheap price to pay.

There were rats aside from Frederica and Lazuline, too. People like Calcton from the Lab, Teetz from the Puk Faction, and Juube from Magical Girl Resources might be aiming for a theft during the confusion or to profit while others were fighting. But they were a low level of threat, harm, and priority compared to the other two, so she would leave them aside for now.

The same went for Kana, who had been sent in from the magical-girl prison. Halna had sensed an incredible presence during her conversation with Kana, so she'd tried to use the power of the Information Bureau to look into her, but no matter where she looked, it stopped at the prison. No criminal history would come up at all. If Frederica had erased her history before sending her in, then she truly was an enemy you couldn't let your guard down with. But if she put too much into investigating Kana and slacked off elsewhere, then she would lose everything. For that reason, she left her aside for the time being.

Now, there was the Founding Festival. Through Tetty, she would circulate the information that the principal had hesitantly given permission for it. A single negotiation with the students would not be enough for her—rather, they would reach an

agreement after repeated concessions on both sides. She would ease the air of suspicion as much as possible.

This was necessary. Getting angry over every little thing would be bad for her health. So she told herself as she took her feather pen in hand, adding her orders in red ink. The magic feather pen ignored Halna's feelings and moved smoothly along. This would be the final festival for the faction vanguards, the covert operatives, the terrorists, and all such magical girls, so she had to be magnanimous about it when she gave them permission.

After everything had been cleaned up, the magical-girl class would recover both its original ideal and any students who were properly qualified for it.

◇ Pshuke Prains

Through an exchange over a number of documents and with mutual compromise, they settled on conditions to participate in the Founding Festival. What they settled on made Pshuke feel like, "*Well, this is fine.*" They were not to use their magical-girl powers; they were to refrain from any excessive contact with the Umemizaki Junior High students; they were to watch out that their program didn't double up with Umemizaki's; and copyright was also forbidden.

Kana had been very seriously saying, "I was thinking if necessary I would have to go negotiate with her personally," but that clearly would have led to more fights—rather, that would have been a fight right there. So Pshuke was thankful to the principal—whose face she didn't know—for making these concessions.

Pshuke had been grumbling and griping like usual, all while maintaining a grumpy expression, but on the inside, she was giddier than ever. She'd only had a normal school life until the age of ten, when she'd become a magical girl, and ever since she had dropped all that to strive in her magical-girl activities. She had to, or she never would have been able to establish herself as a freelancer. It wasn't as if she regretted it. But she was drawn to the fun parts of school life, just a bit—like field trips and outings and events like that. Of course, having classmates she was good friends with was also vital.

As for whether Pshuke was good friends with her classmates or

not—opinions would be divided. But lately things weren't as awkward as they were before, and it had been fun when everyone had made their suggestions about participating in the Founding Festival—even with the dicey element of Kana in there. And as for the members of her group—though one of them looked really overbearing, one of them really did what she wanted with no regard for anything else, one was always spinning her wheels, and one would insert anime into the conversation at every opportunity, they weren't boring people—they actually had a lot that made them interesting.

In making that promise with Sally, at the time, Pshuke had only meant it as a casual promise with an eye to utility as a mercenary—but now, having a secret promise with a classmate was so much like normal school life, she came to think, *Maybe that might be fine.*

Pshuke's heart was already settled on joining in the Founding Festival, and as the event took shape, things were gradually going in the right direction. But once they were at the point where they were going to decide what to do, she started getting suspicious. In the class meeting the day after the negotiations finally ended with the principal, the conflict between her classmates came to a head.

Princess Lightning insisted that they absolutely should do something related to food and beverages. "For a school festival, you just have to have a refreshment stand. Could there be anything else? I say no. This is absolute. Since I have no intention of backing down."

Kumi-Kumi proposed that they all work together to manufacture something. "It's already been decided...that Umemizaki...is doing...the popular refreshment stands. Rather than...trying to sell...something niche...we should all...work together...on something, like, commemorative...on a piece of art that would move people..."

Other various proposals came and went: "make a map of the city," "investigate the seven mysteries of the school," "roller coaster," "tea cups," "haunted house," "instrumental performance," "a play," "censor the proper names for a summary of *Cutie Healer* history," "cosplay shoot," "a public reading," "arm wrestling," "candy making," "fortune telling and spells," "manga café," "lecture on how to keep pets," "lecture on how to draw manga," "cute Lillian knitting lecture," "martial arts lecture," "shogi problems," "sharpening blades," "a ball pit," "learning about weapons you can

own, as far as you can go legally,” “sandbag café,” “movie watch party,” “merry-go-round,” “scientifically study liquids”—and in the end, two remained: the vague and hazy idea of “producing an art piece” and “a refreshment stand,” the plain expression of Lightning’s desires.

A fair amount of time and enthusiasm had been consumed by this point. Pshuke was totally feeling like, *“Who cares anymore, just decide on something already,”* but now was when things really got started. For the Lightning plan and the Kumi-Kumi plan to remain meant, in other words, that it had wound up a showdown between Groups Two and Three. In times like this, Group Two thought of it as an embarrassment to back down, while the Group Three leader had declared from the start that she wasn’t going to yield, and Pshuke couldn’t see a future where either gave in.

Even if she had been more subdued lately, Mephis was Mephis. She looked like a bookworm, but she had the personality of a delinquent and was always up for a fight. And Lightning was Lightning to the bitter end. Her freedom would not recognize any obstructions.

Since they were out of time, homeroom ended for the day, and they decided that if they couldn’t settle it over a discussion at a later date, then they would have a vote. By this decision, Groups Two and Three both came to set their sights on Group One. If they got the votes of Group One, then they would win.

There was some maneuvering in order to secure a majority of the class. By the diversion of school lunch desserts, changing of cleaning duty, and those sorts of furnishing of profit, they made appeals for cooperation on the day of the deciding vote. Since putting it into words would make it illegal, all such bribes were ultimately carried out under pretense of pure kindness, which only seemed to confuse the members of Group One. And Pshuke found it all wearying.

After school, she met up with Sally in the cafeteria as usual, and she voiced complaints of the sort that she couldn’t say out loud in the magical-girl class.

“Right when the vibe in the class was getting good! If we’re clashing again, or going in that direction, I’m really sick of it. Either side should just give in, but neither side will. The group leaders are crazy, and it’s stressing out everyone else.”

Listening to Pshuke’s grumbling, Sally laughed. “Oh, I don’t

think that's quite what's going on, yeahhh."

"Huh? What do you mean?" Feeling sullen about getting laughed at, her words came out harsh.

But Sally tightened up her expression and waved her right hand. "Come on. Compared to how it was before, I think it's like fooling around."

"You think? I dunno."

"They kinda seem like they're enjoying themselves, yeahhh. You should enjoy yourself along with them."

"Enjoy myself, huh..."

From the looks of Sally's human form, she was fulfilled in her real life and high up in the school caste. And she didn't just have looks—she actually had strong communication skills. She was able to have very normal conversations with the eccentrics of Group Three and laugh with them and chide them. She had been managing in the PR department, which was a gathering of formidable communicators, so well, she had to be used to things.

Pshuke thought that if Sally said it was all right, then it had to be all right. While she didn't quite like it, she was won over. At the class meeting the next day, the decision was made easily without having to go to a vote. It was the plan that Tetty proposed, to make a "refreshment booth decorated with a piece of artwork."

After the school meeting was over, Pshuke continued to complain along the lines of, "If it was going to be like this, then we shouldn't have wasted our time bickering."

◇ Diko Narakunoin

Working up to the Founding Festival, the magical-girl class was bubbling with excitement. If Diko had been just another student, she would have been excited along with them, though rather more tacit. But with her original role as a covert operative taken into consideration, she couldn't let herself be sincerely excited—since the final decision that they would definitely be participating in the Founding Festival was synonymous with the countdown to the start of D-Day.

But Princess Lightning, who should obviously have been burdened with the same role as Diko, was clearly excited. She wasn't the very expressive type, but she didn't particularly try to

hide what she was thinking, either. It was as if she felt that hiding her thoughts was a restriction of her freedom.

Lightning fought with everything she had to make their feature for the Founding Festival as she wanted it, and when her plan was combined with Group Two's through Tetty's mediation, she was entirely pleased. Her shaking hands with Mephis didn't seem at all like just a formality, and when she said, "Let's work together and do our best," it didn't ring false.

Unbelievably enough, she was serious. After school, when the Ranyi, Diko, and Lightning trio got a karaoke box for their regular meetings—for things like reports and comparing and adjusting their plans—she said something outrageous.

She said that she'd run into Adelheid yet again at school at night, and she had warned her not to try anything during the Founding Festival. Additionally, she'd even proposed that they share information and work together to have the Founding Festival go off without a hitch.

What Lightning was just boldly telling them was something that would make you suspect she was a double agent. While Diko was privately confused, she listened to the end. Looking at Ranyi, she seemed rattled, but ultimately nodded and said, "I see, yeah, that's an option."

It was obviously not an option.

There were three of them—Ranyi, Diko, and Lightning. Diko had thought that fundamentally, if someone were to be the leader, it would be Lightning, since she'd been trusted to operate on her own. Diko and Ranyi were both Lazuline candidates, and ostensibly of the same rank, so if Diko became the leader, then Ranyi would feel bad, and if Ranyi were the leader, Diko doubted that she would be able to handle things well.

But Lightning had not been chosen as their leader, and the role was foisted on Diko. This clearly bothered Ranyi, and Diko had wondered if this was a failure in personnel selection, but the more she associated with the magical girl called Princess Lightning, the stronger her feeling became that they really couldn't let her be the leader.

At a glance, she seemed competent. Her exceptionally beautiful looks gave her a strength of presence, and her bold personality would allow no faltering or weakness—she appeared to be someone incredible. Diko figured that every single one of their classmates in

the magical-girl class had to be thinking that Princess Lightning was no ordinary person.

But she had no aptitude as a leader or a covert operative. She had taken a total turn on her plan to sow discord in the class, and now she was completely earnest about making the Founding Festival a success. And then she'd made contact with Adelheid. Even if she had attacked her, didn't warning her to avoid the Founding Festival entirely benefit the enemy?

Diko put effort into her clothing and hairstyle because she knew a lot of people valued appearances. If she could make people think that she was "no ordinary person," that alone could help things move along smoothly.

Aside from the fact that she was using what she was born with, Lightning did essentially the same thing. That was why it didn't fool Diko. She observed her coolly and assessed her behavior.

Some people were deceived by appearances. Ranyi was one of them. She was easily taken in by beautiful looks and confident behavior. But Diko couldn't point out that she was being deceived. Ranyi couldn't be described as mentally strong, and she was always worrying about things. If you pointed out she was mistaken in some area and told her, "You're wrong, so fix that," it would make her anxious, and she might not be able to do the job that was expected of her.

Ranyi's personal magic was incredibly convenient, and she was a capable magical girl who did well in battle. But she yearned to be a leader in the field like Lazuline, though Diko doubted she had the aptitude for it. The way she wanted to be Lazuline so badly that she even imitated her vocal cadence went past silly into sad.

But even understanding all this, Diko couldn't point it out—since protecting Ranyi's emotional state was also part of her job. She also had to keep a handle on Princess Lightning so that Ranyi could do her work.

Diko felt like she understood her own abilities. She could fight. It was difficult to say that she was skilled at anything else. It was rather too much to entrust her with coordinating relationships, too.

When it had been revealed that Lightning worked for Lazuline, Diko had told her master that this job was too tough for her. But her master had rejected that statement, saying, "You think too little of yourself."

In a sonorous, beautiful voice, Lightning said, "When the

homunculi went out of control, you know, I had fun. Working together with Adelheid and the other members of Group Two and such to fight the enemies, I thought, oh, this is so much fun. I'm sure it would also be fun to work together toward a single goal for the Founding Festival. Of course, I don't mean for that to be all. After we've gone through everything we have to and the time comes, I'm sure it'll be even more fun to defeat everyone. So we're biding our time right now. Look, Adelheid beat me once, right? I've frankly never really cared at all about who was strongest, but once I actually lost to her, it was surprisingly vexing. It kind of feels unacceptable to end it there. So I certainly will settle that, relax. I'm just saying we need the Founding Festival to make us more motivated and give us some closure. Plus, having more opportunities for interaction will help me read her movements and find her weaknesses and such when we fight—although I can't say whether that would actually work.”

Her rattling off all of that slowed down the workings of Ranyi's brain. Now she would be even more confused by her appearance, attitude, and rank, and lose her capacity for judgment.

Watching Ranyi out of the corner of her eye as she nodded like a dippy bird, Diko thought, *I really can't let things go like this.*

After leaving the karaoke box, she invited Ranyi to do reconnaissance of the school. When Ranyi asked, “You're not inviting Lightning?” Diko clearly shook her head no. Originally speaking, the nighttime reconnaissance mission had been Diko and Ranyi's. This had nothing to do with Lightning. Lots had been going on lately, so they hadn't done it as often, but it wasn't a bad idea to do it that day.

“I want the two of us to go alone.”

It was rare for Diko to speak out loud. Those who knew that would value what she said a little more. Though Ranyi grumbled about why she would say such a thing, she answered Diko's invitation, and the two of them ran to school that night.

It was already getting dark when they left the karaoke box, but by the time they arrived at the school, the sun had set. There were no students endeavoring in their club activities or preparing for the Founding Festival. And on the side of the school building where the magical-girl class was, there was no sign of people or anything living at all.

It looked like neither Lightning nor Adelheid were there that

day. Had they just not come yet, or were they taking the day off? Regardless, it was easier if they weren't there.

Diko gave instructions with hand signs, and Ranyi used the same hand signs to give her the green light. Her expression was more serious than when they had been in the karaoke box, with a faint air of tension. It seemed that Diko's idea to invite just her on a mission to get her to shape up had not been a bad one.

They approached the entrance of the school building. Of course, they didn't go inside. Staying outside the range of the security cameras, they split up, with Ranyi going right and Diko going left, racing out alongside the building.

With the running speed of a magical girl, they covered half the circumference of the old school building in seconds. Of course, you wouldn't be able to tell if anything was off just from looking, so Diko ran through the area, meaning to meet up with Ranyi again immediately. But unintentionally, her feet came to an immediate stop. There was clearly something wrong.

There was a sudden hole on the usual outer wall of the school, which had walls and windows at regular intervals. The hole was big enough that an adult man could pass through easily without bending over. It wasn't the type of hole made from being broken or rotted away. It was a genuine *hole*, cleanly bored out.

Diko immediately used her magic right there on the spot. She used it reflexively, out of surprise and fear. She passed through nowhere to move a short distance instantaneously. She leaped behind a tree that was stunted from being in shade, hiding there as she quietly peeked into the hole.

She could have sworn there was no such hole during the day. And the hole fit too well with its surroundings for it to have been hollowed out by someone doing building work that day after school. The hole looked as if it had been there the whole time, since before the old school building had been designated as "old."

The wind blew through. The clouds must have moved. Sunlight shone into the dim hole.

The sun...?

The sun had set. But Diko had naturally felt that sunlight had shone through it. That was contradictory.

She could see green on the other side. There were tree branches swaying in the wind. It was a fine garden tree, beautifully trimmed. The pale green of the lawn was gentle on the eyes.

The courtyard.

They had deemed the courtyard the most suspicious, a likely entrance to the ruins. One of the missions Diko had been assigned was to pinpoint its location and secure a way in.

The wind blew again. The clouds shaded the sun, and the courtyard went out of view. Still holding her breath, Diko took one silent step after another toward the hole. And then in front of the hole, when she was just within arm's reach, she stopped. Her body was still moving forward, but she halted her feet with strong willpower.

Everything about this was abnormal. It was strange that there was a hole here, it was strange that there was sun shining through only in the courtyard when it was after sunset, and the way she was moving like an insect approaching a light trap was illogical, too. It was highly likely that this was some kind of trap—and not just any trap, but a powerful magic trap.

Diko pulled out her magical phone. She had to send a message to the First. Then she would immediately get out of here and meet up with Ranyi—thinking that far, she suddenly realized something. Why was she stopped here? She could send a message while moving, so she should get out of here quickly. For some reason, Diko's body was still trying to stay here.

I have to move, she thought, but right before she got going, someone grabbed her arm. A hand thrust out of the hole to grip Diko's arm with terrible force. Its fingers were slim, long, and transparently white. The purple fake nails bit deep into her skin, making a drop of blood streak down. The graceful, willowy hand was wounding the arm of a magical girl—in other words, it indicated that the owner of this arm was a magical girl herself.

The hand was trying to drag in Diko with terrifyingly superhuman strength. Lazuline candidates were all powerful fighters, but none of them were this strong. Intuiting that she wouldn't be able to resist, Diko used her magic practically on reflex, moving through a nowhere space to travel, and landed on the grass.

In the spot she'd moved to, Diko was confused. She had *thought* she'd made her goal a place that was just away from the hole, but she was standing somewhere unfamiliar. Garden trees, a brick pathway, a gazebo. This was...the courtyard? Her magic wasn't working normally. Diko had thought she'd moved to get away. She had not been trying to get into the courtyard.

“This is a place for magical girls to study.”

The voice came to her from behind. It was a voice she had never heard before—sweet but carrying well. It was the voice of a magical girl.

“Those such as you with no intention of learning...”

Diko tried to use her magic. But she didn’t go anywhere. She couldn’t even turn around and look at the other’s face. A hand was placed on her shoulder. She couldn’t move. She was at their mercy.

“...shouldn’t be here.”

A flock of crows flew off with a loud flutter of wings. Diko did not stop her feet, glancing up into the eastern sky where the crows had flown as she ran. They were just crows. There wasn’t anything going on here. She reached the back of the school building without any other particularly strange occurrences. Ranyi was leaning against the wall with her hands behind her neck as she looked over at Diko with a scowl.

“You took so long. What the heck were you doing? Was there anything unusual?”

Thinking back, there had been nothing else aside from the crows. Ranyi couldn’t have been waiting more than half a second, but she was being so dramatic. Exasperated, Diko put on a crooked smile.

“So what are we doing now?”

Diko indicated the school building with her chin. She meant, “Let’s leave.”

“We’re leaving? So then what’d we come here for?”

Diko looked back the way she’d come. It wasn’t like anything had happened. And she didn’t believe that crows were unlucky. If she believed in that sort of superstition, she would have had a hard time getting along with Sally Raven.

There had been nothing. But she just kind of had a bad feeling. And any magical girl, especially a Lazuline candidate, knew that magical girl intuition was not something to make light of.

Prompting the grumbling Ranyi along, Diko swiftly left.

◇ **Snow White**

The class 2-F feature in the Umemizaki Founding Festival wound up

being, on Adelheid's suggestion, a ramen shop. It was decided easily without any quarreling. It was a universal menu with firmly rooted popularity, and it also differed from all the Umemizaki main school's menu items. The biggest reason they picked it was that they were able to get some brand-name instant ramen sold to them on the cheap from Adelheid's senior—it was a recent product of hers. They would serve it at a stall decorated with various art pieces.

What with Princess Lightning's naked greed toward food, Snow White had worried she would feel it wasn't worth making and it wouldn't be satisfying—but such worries turned out to be unfounded. The other classmates, who had known her a few months longer than Snow White, knew well that Princess Lightning wouldn't fuss over how things were made. She was ultimately a gourmand who loved to eat. After hearing as much from the members of Group One, like Tetty and Rappy, she nodded. "I see."

If Lightning wasn't going to complain about it, then instant ramen would be a good choice. Constructing the art pieces would certainly be time-consuming, so making the cooking part easier would decrease the burden by just that much.

Besides, even if it was instant, it was nothing to shake a stick at. Made without magic, the flavor of the Twin Dragons-brand ramen won the stamp of approval from everyone who participated in taste testing—including Lightning, who had doubtfully said, "Will it truly be delicious?" In the end, she'd said, "This is plenty good enough."

"Good texture."

"Seconds."

"Hya-ha! This is so good! This is great, for real!"

"Three types of broth? Huh, tonkotsu, miso, shoyu, hmm? Perhaps I'll have the miso next."

"This is the first I've had of this 'ramen' dish—the flavor has quite the depth. It is a fitting meal for the wolves."

"Look, you need to stop inserting manga lines assuming everyone understands your references."

"I'd like a little more toppings in them, yeahhh."

"If we...go too far...the price...will go up."

"I heard she's offering them to us at one-tenth of the list price—is she gonna be okay?"

"Ah dunno if it's 'cause she's tryin' to be legit or what, but they were too expensive ta begin with. Ten percent is just about right."

“Them being so expensive just makes me feel even more badly about it.”

“She’s givin’ us a deal ’cause we’re doin’ advertisin’ and testin’ for ’er—that’s win-win. Then there’s like her pride or instinct as a senior, not wantin’ to look bad to her junior.”

“It kind of...feels like...we’re abusing your senior’s kindness...”

“Ah’m normally always bowin’ mah head to her, so she’d better be nice to me sometimes.”

“All seniors are like that...really...just remembering makes me angry.”

“Hey, she ain’t that bad a senior, y’know?”

“I think this is bound to be a success,” Tetty muttered with earnest emotion, as if digesting things, and her classmates, who had all been talking on their own, quieted for a while. Surely, they all had their own thoughts about the matter.

Snow White was thinking, *I have to do my own job.*

The courtyard was still a blank space to her. Snow White’s magic didn’t reach there. Never mind getting a full portrait, she couldn’t even grasp a clue.

And speaking of the courtyard, she also wasn’t making any progress investigating Satou. Since the voice of Tetty’s heart told her just about nothing related to Satou, she didn’t even really know who this person was. And Tetty felt wary of Snow White’s questioning her about Satou, so it would be dangerous to probe any further.

Things were not going well, but she decided to leave that aside for now and try an approach from another angle. If the magical-girl class was aiming for the Founding Festival, then she could aim for that, too.

The ramen shop would have just ramen. They would make an art piece to decorate the inside of the shop. Kumi-Kumi’s idea of producing an art piece had been fuzzy and pure concept, but giving it a ramen shop as a shell suddenly made the idea more concrete. They filled up ten sheets of draft paper sketching out and conceptualizing ideas, though they were probably a little too big—things like making the dragon that decorated ramen bowls and having it go around the whole classroom interior.

You could tell how exhausted everyone was from the dark circles under their dead eyes—in other words, they were not transforming into magical girls to work. They were doing this in

human form. Nobody was mocking or calling Kumi-Kumi stupid for keeping so honestly to the rule that they were not to use magical-girl powers—in fact, that heightened the morale in the class.

The rules from the principal meant Kumi-Kumi could not use her magic. But having a creation-style personal magic like Kumi-Kumi's often meant aptitude in that direction to begin with. From her plans, you could sense not only her passion and pride but also her clear technique. It was a grand plan: They would gather empty cans, iron pipes, bicycles, tables, a CRT TV, and various other scrap material, clean and disinfect everything, and put it all together to build, color, and finish the dragon.

This art piece was far beyond what you'd expect from a middle school class, but the elite of the magical-girl class excelled, even without transforming. But first, they had to get materials for it. So everyone went around to various places to gather scrap material. In this case, Sally Raven gathering disused items from the PR Department didn't count as using her magical-girl powers. If that counted as having used her powers, then they wouldn't have been able to accept that senior's help in opening a ramen shop in the first place.

During homeroom, recreation time, and after school, the magical girls worked vigorously—washing, disassembling, carving, assembling, painting, and gathering things as the preliminary step. As the other magical girls were heading to their hometowns or the departments they were affiliated with, Snow White waited for a moment when no one would criticize her for it and addressed Miss Ril by the gate.

“Do you have a minute? There's something I'd like to talk about.”

“Sure. What is it?” She looked just a little skeptical, probably because Snow White had spoken to her in a place where there was no one else around.

“You were recommended from the Magical Girl Management Department, weren't you?”

“Yes, apparently so. Though I don't know very much about that... I've never met the person who recommended me.”

Talking with her made Snow White, Koyuki Himekawa, strongly aware of her own exhaustion. Even just hearing the concern in Miss Ril's voice made her feel ready to collapse. But Snow White had to lie to her and use her.

"I've met the chief of the Magical Girl Management Department before," said Snow White.

"Oh, is that right?"

"I did something quite rude to him and made him angry."

"Oh, that's..."

"I've been wanting to apologize, but I haven't been able to get an audience with him. So, um, I have a request. We've received some garbage from the places that Sally and Dory recommended, right?"

Sally had carried in a large volume of cardboard boxes from the PR Department. There were just so many, she couldn't carry them all, so she had gotten Pshuke, Ranyi, and Diko to help her. Apparently, Lightning had also tried to help but had been politely refused. It wasn't like Snow White couldn't understand the desire to not bring Princess Lightning into the PR Department.

Dory had carried in some incomprehensible objects from the Lab. These incomprehensible objects could only be described as incomprehensible—some were warm like human skin and slimy with mucus. Saying that she would feel bad to throw it all away, Tetty was with her to sort them all out.

Miss Ril gently tilted her head. Snow White revealing her old failure now explained why she'd waited for a moment when nobody else was around. Miss Ril's suspicion seemed to ease, but now she appeared confused.

"I would like to help...but as I've said before, it's simply that I was recommended, and I don't know who recommended me and for what reasons. So I don't know their contact information, either."

"That's no problem," said Snow White. "It's a public institution, so you can find out their contact information easily if you look it up."

"Is that right? Then you don't need me, do you?"

"If I say that Snow White is trying to contact them, they're not going to listen to me, and if I made a sudden visit, I'd get shown away at the door... This is because of what I did in the past—but then I can't apologize for it, and things have always stayed like this...so please! If I have you accompanying me, then we can go together."

Miss Ril still seemed to be at a loss, but Snow White knew that she was weak to requests and also that she couldn't abandon people in trouble. While Snow White felt guilty to take advantage of a

good person's weakness, she bowed her head even deeper, putting her hands together.

◇ Ragi Zwe Nento

It wasn't that Ragi had any special attachment to the magical-girl class. He just knew the history behind its establishment. He figured this wasn't going to go according to their ideals. Even if this class was being touted as education for magical girls, those putting in recommendations weren't going to readily accept that. They were obviously going to send in magical girls under their patronage in order to expand the interests of their factions. Once that happened, the magical-girl class would simply be an extension of their scheming, and there would be no education, development, or anything at all of that nature.

Ragi hadn't been expecting anything of it from the start, thinking of it as an enterprise with fine ideals and nothing else, but even so, he didn't think to carelessly expend the single recommendation slot he had been allotted. Ostensibly speaking, he'd had this recommendation slot for a magical-girl class foisted on him since he was a specialist in magical girls, so he had to fulfill his responsibility.

To begin with, in the Magical Girl Management Department, there were no magical girls "under his patronage." Ragi selected a magical girl purely with a neutral position and eye. He completely ignored those who tried to flatter him and say, *"What about this one or that one."*

Ragi examined the matter from various angles and selected one person who seemed like it: financially needy, excellent intellect, strong capacity for learning, insatiable ambition, kindness, the communication skills to build smooth relationships, having no ties of obligation to any organization, passion, tenacity, toughness, manners, age, family relatives, reward and punishment, qualifications. And that was the magical girl Miss Ril.

Being full of those sent in from each faction, the magical-girl class would be a hotbed of demons. Living there while remaining a good magical girl would come with struggle. There would be a need to keep an eye on her to ensure that so-called bad adults could not interfere with her.

Or so he had thought, but Ragi hadn't had a handle on how things had gone since choosing her. A short while ago, he had been in such dire straits that he had forgotten his concern for Miss Ril. What was supposed to have been just an inheritance meeting had become a great tragedy that had resulted in multiple deaths. Sometime after that terrible kerfuffle was over, he received contact from Miss Ril, who said she wanted to get together with him.

She wanted to meet him in person to thank him for his recommendation, and also to ask if he had any trash, that she hoped he would share it. Apparently, they were going to use it for some classroom presentation called the Founding Festival.

Thinking about the magical-girl class for the first time in a long while, Ragi folded his arms and looked up at the ceiling. Even calling it the ceiling, the Management Department office had no boundaries. The ceiling was blackness that went on forever.

It seemed that she was diligently living her school life. If she was participating in some event and proactively working with others, then did that mean she'd made friends? He would hope that it wouldn't be bad magical girls pretending to be friends, but had she really made the distinction? There were many concerns. Partly out of guilt about forgetting, Ragi responded to the call from Miss Ril immediately.

Ragi had been depressed for a while. There had been nothing to enjoy. Unpleasantness just summoned more unpleasantness. Before, Ragi would have drowned all that out with anger, but he couldn't do that anymore. He had come to speak less, only doing the minimum necessary and living quietly.

Right after replying to Miss Ril, Ragi made a golem to do some work for him and had it gather the waste materials. That still didn't seem like enough, so he went elsewhere to gather more. Then he lowered the security of the management office to make it so you could enter the room smoothly.

He was just like a foolish old grandpa working for the sake of his grandchild, he thought, and snorted. If grandfathers and grandchildren out there all had relationships like this, then it had been the right choice after all not to have made a family, he figured, convincing himself.

After that, he made all the various preparations, and by the time he was finally relaxed, there was a knock on the door to the Management Department office. Ragi cleared his throat twice to

ready it and prompted them to come in.

Though it was the first time he had met her, it wasn't as if he'd never seen what she looked like. Obviously—the documentation had included that. From midair, he nodded heavily at the metallic magical girl greeting him, and then his eyes happened to stop behind her. Miss Ril was not alone.

There was a wavering of white flower decorations, and in a twinkle, Ragi's expression turned harsh. Though Miss Ril remained expressionless, she seemed surprised, but seemed too overwhelmed to be concerned about the magical girl behind her.

"It's been a long time, Management Department Chief. I'm Snow White."

He didn't respond to her greeting out loud. He just replied with a glare.

◇ 0 Lulu

Cindy Neckchopper was a mercenary magical girl with a gigantic magic razor that only touched living organisms and passed through everything else. Attacking with her razor of over a yard long, she would scoff at enemy abilities that tried to block it with weapons and armor, wounding only their bodies. Her main business was bodyguarding of aristocrats, though all the rumors said she was a sadist who would wield her razor even outside of work. But now, focused attacks from kunai and shuriken had turned her into a porcupine, lying there. Her razor, being unable to touch inanimate objects, had failed to shield her from them.

Cottie Riel was a mercenary magical girl whose magic would change the strength and properties of tissue paper that she touched. She had hidden bags hanging all over and was equipped with tissue boxes. While her magic seemed rather humorous, contrary to appearances, the woman herself was all logic. Those who took her lightly were sliced up by tissues or beaten up. Unlike Cindy, she had managed the storm of kunai and shuriken with hardened tissues, only to be cut down by Ripple when she had leaped out of the thicket from the opposite direction.

Tateru Amamiya had a carpenter motif and magic carpenter tools. They said she could build a whole house at three thousand times the regular speed. She could have made her living with

carpentry work, but she couldn't help her battle-loving disposition and had become a mercenary. She made use of dangerous magic carpenter tools like nails, hammers, planes, saws, chisels, and ink lines to polish off her enemies. She had failed to catch Ripple's slice when she'd come in from a blind angle, using Cottie Riel's body as she fell as cover.

Then there was the Black Knight Guinevere. All the items she carried, from her jet-black helmet and armor to her giant sword, were part of her costume and had magic cast on them. Her personal magic was a comparatively plain one—she had a magic horse. But her skills with a blade were top class among Archfiend Cram School graduates. She had a particular fixation on one-on-one battles, and she was good enough to persist in that fixation, which to Lulu's mind was completely pointless. Having defeated Cindy Neckchopper, Cottie Riel, and Tateru Amamiya one after another, Ripple stopped before Guinevere, faced her directly, and bowed her head. All of this had been by Lulu's instruction.

"I'd like to ask for a one-on-one match," said Ripple.

Under her helmet, Guinevere chuckled. "You want a one-on-one after taking us by surprise?"

"If you don't want to...then back out now."

There was no ring of challenge in Ripple's voice. It was entirely dispassionate. But that tone, as if to say that she was just telling the facts as they were, sounded to Lulu more challenging than anything.

But Guinevere was not angry or irritated—rather, that improved her mood.

"Oh, I don't mind. Cindy and the others being beaten was a lack of training on their part."

Just ten seconds earlier, kunai and shuriken had been raining down over the area like hail. But none of them had hit Guinevere—they hadn't even nicked her armor. She'd swung around her great sword to knock down all the shuriken and kunai, and had even protected her dear horse. Even from Lulu's eye as a Lazuline candidate, the feat had been so swift, she'd just barely caught it in her vision.

With shuriken and kunai sticking up all over the whole campground, Guinevere nimbly threw a leg over her horse and thrust her sword out at Ripple. "My name is the Black Knight Guinevere!" Her face was hidden by her helmet, and all that

showed out of it was the long silver hair that slipped out from the cracks. But her voice contained unconcealed glee.

“Ripple.” That came from a voice as subdued as a bottomless mire. But she moved fast.

Shuriken and kunai flew through the air. Her ninja sword whizzed, and the giant horse neighed. The battle had begun, and it would be difficult to interfere now. Lulu had never planned to do that; it was important that she *couldn't* interfere. The two magical girls fought while moving, going from the campground deeper into the forest. Trees and dirt flew, emphasizing their presence awfully even after they went out of view.

Lulu slowly stood up, making the thicket sway as she showed herself. The sound of leaves rustling gave away her presence. But Ripple and Guinevere paid her no mind at all and continued to fight. What Lulu was concerned about were the remaining magical girls.

There had been a total of six magical girls gathered here in the unused campground deep in the mountains. They were mercenaries hired by the Caspar Faction and awaiting orders. Three had been defeated by Ripple's surprise attack: Cindy, Cottie, and Tateru. The magical girl fighting one-on-one with Ripple was Guinevere. The remaining two, Shocksinger, who was good at support with magic song, and Silent Wave, who prided herself on the various functions equipped in her mechanical right arm, were looking at Lulu dangerously.

Singer gingerly moved one arm, reaching out to the lute on her back.

“Forget it,” said Lulu.

Singer stopped. She was looking at Lulu with doubtful eyes.

“Why would I? Just 'cause you don't want to fight two-on-one?”

“Because it would benefit both of us.”

“Both of us?”

“You should decide what to do after you see how things turn out with those two. We're not evil or bloodthirsty. If you surrender without opposing us, you'll get treated differently.”

“What? You think that Guinevere is gonna lose?”

“My partner is just as strong. In Musician of the Forest, Cranberry's, final exam, she survived the intense fight where even Cranberry lost her life,” Lulu said while casting her magic on a purple stone, an amethyst that was tucked in her pocket that was

third from the top and second from the right. It emphasized *sincerity* while also making you want *tranquility of the mind*.

She had not, in fact, lied. If Ripple won and came back, them having not fought with Lulu would mean better treatment for their confinement. Conversely, even if Ripple lost, there was no reason that Lulu had to rush to fight them. If Guinevere remained fine and chipper, then it wouldn't just be two-on-one—it would be three-on-one.

The irritation vanished from one of the girls' expressions. She was thinking, *Now that you point that out, that's reasonable*. She was unsure about what to do and wasn't attacking. That was basically a mild way of accepting Lulu's cease-fire deal. She didn't really want to fight, and Lulu was giving her an out, prompting her to make the rational decision. Lulu was controlling this situation—but the problem started here.

They were just barely handling it all this time. There were a lot of enemies. Ripple's initial attack had silenced a number of them rapidly, following which she got their biggest foe, Guinevere, into a one-on-one. Lulu was to handle the enemies Ripple had failed to get while making sure to stay out of their one-on-one fight and also keeping their enemies from informing their employer about the attack.

Things had gone miraculously well thus far. But would things continue to go well? It was a pretty reckless strategy, but it wasn't like they'd had a choice. Frederica must have come up with some countermeasures, as the amount of information they'd been sent had continuously shrunk until right when they had been thinking they should abort the mission, when they'd gotten their first job in a long while. Caught between Snow White and Frederica, Ripple had wanted so desperately to do something that she'd leaped at the opportunity.

Lulu had confidence in her legs. She should run before the other two came back. So Lulu's calculating side had argued, but her honorable side kept her where she was. She racked her brains and came up with a strategy. Even she thought the strategy was reckless, but despite that, Ripple had not made a single complaint. She'd just said in her brusque manner, "Let's do it." Lulu thought that meant she believed in her.

After both of their feelings had exploded, they talked about everything they could talk about and listened to everything they

could hear from each other, talking for a whole day. Lulu didn't understand how Ripple felt. She couldn't tell at all from her attitude if she saw Lulu as someone she could use for now or a partner worthy of trusting her back to. But whatever the form it took, she still trusted Lulu, even after hating her that much. So then Lulu had to trust Ripple right back. This ad hoc team required both of them, or they would go down. Lulu wasn't going to let things end just yet.

Frankly speaking, she felt that she had talked too much. There had been no need to talk about her mother and father as well. She had even wound up talking about how she'd been in the habit of searching for change in vending machines for a time, how she had a complex about children who went to school, how she couldn't quite make friends with the other Lazuline candidates, and how she felt like she subconsciously looked for flaws in other people.

She had definitely let herself get carried away, but that wasn't all. She had also wanted to listen to what Ripple had to say. Though their association had been brief, she'd still come to understand that Ripple was fair in a way. Lulu had figured that if she talked, then Ripple would talk, too.

And then she was able to hear her story. She heard the infamous story of Cranberry's exam, about enemies like Calamity Mary and Pythie Frederica, about Top Speed and Snow White, about her mother—hearing about how her absolutely gross stepfather had put his hands on her, Lulu had punched the bed, saying, “Men, right?!”

From the important things to the trivial, surely there was meaning in having talked about it. Right now, as Ripple fought, she trusted Lulu a little.

A minute later, after a final shrill metallic sound, the forest became quiet. The battle must have ended.

Lulu was supposed to have been acting cool, but now she audibly swallowed her spit.

A single magical girl appeared from beyond the grove, dragging her leg. Her hair was loose and disheveled, and her shuriken hair decoration was missing. Blood dripped down her face, and there were slices of varying sizes all over her body. Her face was transformed by her broken cheekbone. You could even tell from the outside that she had broken bones here and there, at her rib and left shoulder.

“She's lying...over there.” Ripple indicated with her jaw. She

had to mean Guinevere.

Ripple glared at the remaining two. Lulu was about to stop her but then retreated half a step back without a word. At some point, Ripple had put a kunai in her mouth. Her feet inched forward.

Ripple hadn't lost any of her will to fight. She was facing them with the intent to kill. But in that state, she had to be beyond somehow getting through on guts alone. Frankly speaking, she was too wounded to count as a fighting force. But despite that, all the magical girls who presently remained had their eyes fixed on every single move she made.

Ripple crouched. There was no more time for hesitating. Right on the verge, at the moment when Lulu had to stop her there or she would die, Shocksinger raised her hands.

"I surrender."

Ripple relaxed her stance and spat out her kunai. Lulu restrained the urge to cry as she rushed over to Ripple.

CHAPTER 7

THOSE EXPOSED AND THOSE NOT EXPOSED

◇ 0 Lulu

The fight with Guinevere had left Ripple battered. Many times already, it had gotten so bad that it was baffling for her to be on her feet, but this time it was baffling that she hadn't died. Lulu anticipated that they would have to wait quite a while for their next job and figured they would coop themselves up in a business hotel for a recovery lifestyle.

But a doctor sent them a large magic gem. Such gems, which were used as both a Magical Kingdom energy source as well as currency, had nothing so refined as the special meaning of other stones. Its effects were unromantic and straightforward: Use it, and you could gain energy.

What this meant, in other words, was "recover fast."

0 Lulu wrapped Ripple in even more bandages than usual and laid her down on the bed of the business hotel. Sitting down on the bed beside her, she extracted energy from the magic gem to send to the healing of her injuries.

Head hanging, Lulu pondered.

This doctor wasn't the type to give them special treatment because this fight had been tougher than usual. There was a reason they'd sent this magic gem. In other words, there was a reason they had to have Ripple's injuries healed quickly. That could mean only one thing.

"Lulu."

Lulu lifted her head to see Ripple looking at her with concern. "What is it?"

“Don’t give me that. Why the heck are you worrying about me? You’re clearly the one we should be worrying about. Do you understand how badly you’re hurt?”

After saying her piece, she took a breath, and in that moment, Ripple opened her mouth. “What happened?”

“Agh... Yes, something happened.” Lulu hung her head again before lifting it with more force. “My master would absolutely never send you a special bonus for no reason. If she’s sending such a big magic gem over, then there’s a good reason for that, okay. In other words, she’s thinking she might need your help in the near future.”

When Ripple started sitting up, Lulu rose from the bed. “Lie down,” she ordered, pushing her. “A magic gem of this caliber isn’t cheap. As you know, my magic needs gems, but I don’t get paid much, and I hardly ever get an extra bonus, so I only use worthless gems. Good gems would be even more useful, but using a good gem each time must seem like bad cost performance to her, I figure. So if she’s sending me such a fine magic gem, then things must be pretty urgent.” Lulu let out a breath. “We’re probably going to be in conflict with Frederica soon.”

The warmth left Ripple’s expression. It was cold and sharp.

“And it also means that the magical-girl class is going to be in trouble.”

The warmth returned to Ripple’s face. There was a mixture of multiple feelings there now: anger, confusion, sadness. She kept trying to sit up, so Lulu stood again and held her down.

“You only have one body. You can’t go to both, and it won’t be allowed. The magical-girl class and Frederica’s residence are a couple dozen miles apart. There’s no way you’ll be able to move easily from one to the other with that leg.”

Lulu brought her face close to the struggling Ripple. Their foreheads clunked together, and she pressed her down from above. “There is one thing we can do.”

Ripple’s resistance weakened. Lulu gradually came away and sat on her original spot on the bed. Ripple gripped the edge of the sheets, looking at her with an imploring expression.

Don’t give me that look.

Keeping her thoughts in the back of her throat, Lulu said, “Like I said before, nobody thinks of me as very important. If the time comes, it’s not like I absolutely have to be by your side. Basically...

my idea is that if you can trust me, then I will go to the magical-girl class.”

She tried to follow up with, “*Can you trust me with your precious Snow White?*” but Ripple said, “Do it,” at exactly that moment, and Lulu was unable to finish.

◇ **Tetty Goodgripp**

The information Kana brought that day caused a major shock for the magical-girl class. “Apparently, a number of classes will be making original T-shirts as a uniform.”

“For real?!”

“Isn’t that something you do for sports festivals and athletic days?”

“Oh, I figure some places will do it for cultural festivals, too, yeahhh.”

“This kind of feels...unfair.”

“This is...completely...unexpected...”

“Shit, shit, shit... They’re just going hog wild ’cause we’re not experienced with this stuff!”

“Should our class make some, as well?”

“T-shirts are a must item fer a ramen shop.”

“You think so?”

“Then wrappin’ towels ’round our heads, it’ll be perfect.”

“Must, must!”

“Wiiilllccuum!”

“And hey, why’d you get that information from Umemizaki?”

“When that unpredictable accident occurred before, I actually used it to get myself an information source. A dog has their own way, as a wolf has theirs.”

“T-shirts, huh. Making that sort of thing costs money, right?”

“Well, it shouldn’t be that expensive. What do we do for the designs?”

“We can’t make it like *Cutie Healer*, yeahhh?”

“No copyrighted stuff.”

“We can’t let it get out that we’re magical girls... So assuming that out of the gate, I’d like it to be at least a little magical girl-esque. Even if it’s nothing so big and loud.”

They gradually fell into the decision of making T-shirts, and the

topic shifted to what to do about the design. Tetty joined in on the discussion, but privately, her worries were gradually growing larger.

She hadn't even thought of making matching uniforms. And she hadn't been the only one. None of the others in the class had, either. It wasn't that they lacked in imagination or intellect. It was just that they were all unused to this type of event.

They were making T-shirts now because they were copying someone else. The Umemizaki students might also have come up with some other ideas. And if they'd come up with some original ideas, they probably wouldn't tell Kana. All they had told her was the common idea of "matching uniforms."

It wasn't as if they were in competition. This Founding Festival wasn't for deciding who was better. But Tetty couldn't deny that the feelings inside her were saying she didn't want to lose. Rather, more accurately, she didn't want to be looked down on.

Tetty was aware that she wasn't especially talented as the student representative. But her classmates were different. Even if they hadn't been magical girls, they were still all wonderful students. Mephis had the leadership to pull everyone aggressively along after her, and Tetty had never met any other middle schooler who was as good a person as Miss Ril. Kumi-Kumi's caution, Kana's ability to make things happen, Rappy's cheer, Arlie's curiosity, Lightning's immeasurable quality, Diko's intensity—she could keep coming up with traits where they excelled forever.

Just thinking about how these girls might be looked down on as nothing special because they were unused to school festivals and cultural festivals was absolutely mortifying.

Though Tetty was not that capable, she was the student rep. She was obligated to guide the class in a better direction. As she carried out her regular duties as the student rep, such as leading homeroom and supporting her fellow students, she considered things. There had to be some idea that would be enough to match up to the craftiness and cunning of Umemizaki Junior High.

But unfortunately, Tetty was unable to come up with any great ideas on her own. She came up with a few, like linking to a video submission website or having live music inside their shop, but when it came to actually doing it, all of them seemed like they would generate problems.

It wasn't the deadline yet, but if she couldn't think of an idea

after a day of considering it, then she probably wouldn't be able to think of anything, even if she pondered it all the way up to the deadline. She understood that from experience.

Before, Tetty would have given up there. But in the few months that she had been given the serious responsibility that was student rep of the magical-girl class, she had been sorely tried by her unique classmates, enough to make her want to cry. She wouldn't give up right away.

After school in the courtyard, Tetty spoke to Satou. Tetty couldn't come up with anything on her own, and her classmates had also come up with all they had. But she hadn't asked Satou yet. Satou was a mage, so she might well be struck with a great idea that magical girls wouldn't come up with.

It was thanks to Satou mediating with the principal that they were able to participate in the Founding Festival. Tetty was so thankful just for that, she felt like paying her respects every day wouldn't be enough. She had enough shame that she felt that it was clearly brazen to ask anything further of the mage. But here, she would make this intrusion, knowing just how brazen that was.

"Hmm," Satou muttered, moving her hand away from the weed she'd been about to pull. She wiped the sweat on her forehead with the white towel hanging around her neck, wiped the ends of her ears, patted off the dirt on the hem of her work outfit, and muttered, "I see," then nodded with a gesture that made Tetty think of a kind old man.

"Ideas, hmm? But there's a limit to what you can do. For starters, I can't recommend anything that would drastically increase your amount of work or the burden on you, and it's against the rules to do something more than the feature that you announced to Umemizaki beforehand."

Tetty gradually hung her head.

"So you can work out something in an area outside the shop if it won't cause trouble for anyone."

Tetty's head bounced up. "So what does that mean, basically?"

"The shop is in the old school building...in other words, a classroom in this building. You have to go through the hallway to reach it. If the courtyard is on the way, then wouldn't that be a bit of an idea?" Satou laughed out loud, the tips of her ears trembling.

That sounded wonderful to Tetty, but she couldn't feel glad right away. "Huh...is that all right? You can't get into the courtyard

without permission.”

“Look at it the other way—you just need permission.”

She remembered having been told, “*What about inviting Mephis?*” Unfortunately, what with Tetty’s lack of courage and things, she hadn’t been blessed with an opportunity to invite her, but it wasn’t like nobody aside from Tetty and Satou was ever allowed in here.

“It’ll be a special day, after all. I’m sure you’ll be able to get permission. There will be people looking forward to having some good ramen and people coming back full and satisfied. If this place could give all those people a treat for the eyes, nothing could please me more, as the one who’s been maintaining it.”

Now, a few moments later, happiness was overflowing from Tetty’s heart. She was overcome with emotion as she clasped Satou’s hands. Voice shaking, she murmured, “Thank you very much.”

◇ Rappy Taype

The magical-girl class was gathering materials for making a decorative dragon—trash like plastic bottles, plastic containers, iron plates, and cardboard boxes. The more they had, the better, so some were even going to their affiliated offices for help, like the Elite Guard, the PR Department, or the Department of Diplomacy.

They were surprised when Dory brought in two armfuls of some incomprehensible rubberlike and metallic junk from the Lab, but they were even more surprised when Miss Ril brought in golem materials, lumps of stone and iron from the Management Department. Rappy hadn’t quite imagined that the chief of the Management Department would cooperate for this sort of event.

Tetty didn’t bring anything from the Information Bureau. *Well, of course*, Rappy thought—the department would probably treat any garbage as confidential.

Rappy didn’t try to get anything from Magical Girl Resources, either. She was practically a spy, so she couldn’t slip in and out of the group while playing dumb to the other magical girls like, “*Oh yeah, I’m from the Magical Girl Resources Department.*” Or so you would think, but the situation had changed now. Rappy was very reluctantly forced to return to the Magical Girl Resources

Department under the pretense of “I’m gonna grab some trash.”

“Pardon me.”

“Welcome back.”

The Magical Girl Resources Department was at the front line of magical girl culture. In other words, it was a maelstrom within a maelstrom where you were hard put to it just to survive. Many times, it had been swallowed up in the waves of reform, and each time it had been “renewed.” The last renewal had been harsher than ever before—she’d heard that blood had flowed.

The current chief of the Magical Girl Resources Department was supposedly one of those who had caused blood to flow, but her outward appearance was always peaceful, at the very least. Rappy had never seen her raise her voice. That was what made her so terrifying.

A magical girl with purplish-silver hair and freckles sat on the other side of a large, rustic oak desk, eyes fixed on Rappy. She was the current chief of Magical Girl Resources, Juube. Even just the fact that she was being looked at automatically made Rappy nervous, and she stroked the pad of her right middle finger with her thumb.

The vice-department chief, who was sitting daintily on the visitors’ sofa beside her, was looking pitifully at Rappy. The puppet she had on her hand, which looked just like Rappy, moved its mouth to say, “*I’m sorry*,” but that wasn’t going to help her any.

“Snow White has requested cooperation.”

This was the major cause of the change in their situation. Juube nodded at Rappy’s report. “I’ve heard. This is pretty sudden.”

She talked like she was addressing a child, which startled Rappy into looking back at her. The Juube Rappy knew spoke in a harder manner. Juube went “Ah,” and clapped her hands and nodded. “Pardon me, you’re the real thing. Lately, I’ve had a lot of chances to speak with the puppet Rappy. If I don’t pay attention, my tone of voice changes, but don’t worry about it. Well then, continue.”

Rappy cleared her throat and continued as if nothing had happened. You wouldn’t be able to survive the Magical Girl Resources Department if you got hung up on every little strange thing staff here did.

“The Founding Festival is approaching. I imagine she’s thinking it’s likely they’ll make their move.”

Rappy figured she knew something anyway, but she still had to report what she had to report. If she made assumptions and kept silent about it, all that would remain would be the fact of her silence.

“Why do you think she made contact now? That’s strange, isn’t it?”

Juube’s tone had already gone back to how it was before, but Rappy ignored it and responded, “I hear Snow White went to the Management Department with Miss Ril. Perhaps at that time, she had the Management Department chief show her mine...and your career histories, and she thought of the idea.”

“I see. I was originally a member of the R&D Department. It would be logical to suspect that I might be under Lazuline’s patronage. If that’s the case, then she would hesitate to request cooperation. The Management Department’s data is highly reliable—she must have seen as much, and upon confirming that we have no such relationship with Lazuline, she reached out to Magical Girl Resources. Magical Girl Resources’s...or rather, my reputation isn’t very good with Inspection, so that must have been Snow White’s independent choice. Ooh, she really is a scary magical girl...don’t you think?”

After Pflē’s demise, Frederica had been making Magical Girl Resources her nest, and Juube had been the one to kick her in the bottom and drive her out. Since she was clearly enemies with Frederica, Snow White could have reached out to her earlier, but it seemed she’d suspected they were in communication with Lazuline’s side. So then she might even have considered that the conflict with Frederica was a sham and that they were actually in cahoots with her. Snow White could apparently read minds, but she must not have been certain just from reading Rappy’s mind. A scary person to deal with, indeed.

Rappy listened in silence without changing her expression or making any interjections.

But Juube suddenly leaned forward over her desk and gave Rappy a mischievous look. “By the way, Rappy?”

“Yes, ma’am?”

“About working with Snow White.” Juube folded her fingers and looked down at an empty spot on her desk for a while, then lifted her face. “In emergencies, you’re to be under Snow White’s command and follow her instructions. No matter what happens, her

orders are your top priority. There's no need for you to try to consider the benefit or loss for the department."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Even if other forces are fighting, avoid supporting either one of them as much as possible, okay? Of course, if you have received orders from Snow White, then that's something else."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Also, yes, your senior Dark Cutie has yet to return. That's not good. It's not as if she's left her position, so we have to get her back. I hear she shows up now and then around Snow White, so if you see her, I'd be glad if you could tell her to come back."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Also, make sure to enjoy the Founding Festival to the fullest."

Rappy started to reply, "Yes, ma'am," just like before, and closed her mouth, looking back at her automatically. Juube was smiling at her.

"Of course, you can't let your guard down."

Rappy replied, "Yes, ma'am," as if nothing had happened.

"Good grief, it's nothing but revolutionaries out there who want to do something about the Magical Kingdom—it's quite the bother. And they get so obsessive about it, thinking they have to do it themselves, too. It's so hopeless. This is why Inspection is always so busy. Awful."

Aren't you one of those revolutionaries who wants to do something about things, too? thought Rappy, but she couldn't say that out loud. Juube was scary. No one knew who she really was, not originally being from Magical Girl Resources and coming rather from R&D, and the fact that she'd risen to the top of the department in spite of that was very scary.

Rappy wouldn't survive if she said a few words too many—for example, *"Why not have Snow White do something for us in exchange for accepting her request for cooperation?"* The boss could tell what she thought anyway, but there was no helping that. That was what it meant to deal with Juube.

Rappy bowed her head deeply and left the room. When the vice-chief waved her puppet hand at her, she gave her a little wave back.

From here on out was her do-or-die. Having gotten the order from her superior, she would look to Snow White for instructions, and then she would do what she had to, to ensure her own survival.

If she hadn't been capable of that, she wouldn't have been able to survive in the Magical Girl Resources Department at this age. And being able would save her innocent classmates, too. It wasn't particularly *necessary*, but even Magical Girl Resources, which people called block one of hell, had some honor and sentiment.

"Ah, oh yes."

Called to a stop, Rappy turned around. Even understanding rationally that Juube couldn't have read her mind, her heart was racing like mad.

"What is it?" Rappy asked.

"I put together a lot of old junk. Take it and show it off."

Rappy bowed her head for a full ten seconds.

◇ Snow White

Being that it was settled that they would make some original T-shirts, what would they do about the design? Everyone had their own ideas that they wouldn't back down on, and the homeroom was in chaos.

"It's not as if we're going to put that we're magical girls in writing and print it on. I'm just saying that it would be nice for a magical-girl class to make them a little magical girl-ish."

"So ya say, but that design of yers is *Cutie Healer*, Sally."

"Hey, no it's not. You can't say that for sure just from the silhouette."

"But...this makes it...basically...fan art..."

"They said we're not allowed anything copyrighted..."

"Look, it's like, yeahhh. I could go get permission from the PR Department."

"The principal says no, so there's no point to getting permission from them."

"Okay, so then Sally's suggestion is a no-go."

"Hey, hold on, hold on. I'll make it a little more so like you can't tell even from the silhouette."

Everyone else must have thought Sally's design was a sure reject, but she pushed it and pushed it, holding out until she had consumed one third of the original allotted homeroom time. But this was just a prelude to the battle ahead.

"It's a ramen shop, so wouldn't illustrations of ramen and a

donburi be safe?"

"If we're doing that, then wouldn't it be great to have the smell of ramen, too?"

"Hey, but we'd be wearing them normally once the Founding Festival was over, right? I kinda wouldn't want the smell to be lingering."

"It'd suck if it transferred to the other laundry... I'd die."

"Wouldn't that be technically difficult in the first place? The smell of ramen."

"Ummm, this is a request from our sponsor...er, the senior who's supplyin' our ramen, but she said she'd be glad if we could stick in the brand logo somewhere."

"A three-headed dragon... That's the Twin Dragons brand, right? Why are there three heads?"

"Er magic evolved from bein' able to summon two dragons to summonin' three dragons. But since she cain't get 'er name changed, she's still Twin Dragons—she calls herself Super Dragons, but ya apparently cain't change the brand name, either."

"I really don't give a damn about your friend's private business."

"Private biz."

"Everyone's a dummy."

"*Cutie Healer...*"

"Well then...shouldn't we make...the art piece...dragon...that decorates the classroom...three-headed...too...?"

"I'm not sure we have the time to be remaking it."

"Indeed. We have no time. While we're wasting time here, the wolves' Dead Road is—"

"Hey, I have an idea. If the smell of ramen is too much, then how about the smell of vanilla ice cream? It's probably easier than the smell of ramen, and it's no problem if it shifted to your other laundry, right? Since there's some fabric softeners scented like that."

"Diko! Shove her out in the hallway and have her cool her head!"

They weren't allowed to transform into magical girls during homeroom. For that reason, Koyuki Himekawa, being not Snow White, couldn't hear the voices of their hearts. All she could do was make guesses based on their attitudes combined with what she heard while she was transformed.

Mephis was surely worrying even now. But she didn't show it on her face. She was trying to control the situation, as the leader of Group Two. Rappy, who was working for Magical Girl Resources, and Adelheid, who was working for Diplomacy, were currently acting like normal middle schoolers.

While participating moderately in the conversation, Koyuki asked what she should do.

Could she convince Mephis? If she was going to do it, then she couldn't do it alone. She had a strong sense of responsibility. If Koyuki brought it up in the wrong way, then it would go badly and get passed to Frederica.

Frederica would know about Snow White's magic, but she'd involved herself with the magical-girl class like it was obvious she should. Having functionally taken over the Caspar Faction, Frederica was too great a foe for Snow White right now. The information about Frederica she could get from Adelheid's and Mephis's minds was fragmentary, and she couldn't get a full picture of what Frederica was trying to do. Frederica was trying to restrict the information as much as she could to keep Snow White from learning anything.

While Snow White was thinking about Frederica, the face of another magical girl rose in her mind. How was Ripple doing? She could only remain in hiding for so long. Was she getting support from someone, or had someone captured her and was keeping her imprisoned? Every time Snow White thought about it, she concluded that Ripple might not be alive anymore, and every time something icy ran down her spine. When Ripple had sliced off Sachiko's head and run off, her heart had been saying that she never planned to see Snow White again. If Snow White wanted to tell her not to do something so selfish, first, she would have to see Ripple.

She rocked her head right, rocked it left, and brought it back to its original position. She couldn't be losing track of her goal. Ripple was surely connected to this, too. She would defeat Pythie Frederica.

◇ **Calkoro**

The whole magical-girl class was busily working away. Since it was

the students participating in the Founding Festival, there were no odd jobs for Calkoro to help with. But it was Calkoro's role to keep an eye on the busily working students, so she had to be in the classroom. This was a huge pain.

Perhaps since the Founding Festival was close, Halna was at school at just about all times, and any foolish slacking off would lead to instant ruin. Even getting a cup of coffee in the staff room was difficult.

They really are doing quite the job, she thought with 80 percent exasperation and 20 percent admiration as she watched them at work. Since she was already done rechecking their grades for a minor test, she stood from her seat to go to the washroom. Her sole pleasure was to take out her phone in the washroom stall to play a round of solitaire.

Wondering whether she should see if Halna would get mad at her over reading an academic book or a spellbook, she was walking down the hallway when Princess Lightning, walking the other way, caught her eye. Calkoro was a lot better now than when she'd first been appointed to the magical-girl class, but even so, her eyes moved away automatically. Her looks were just too much to get used to.

Right now, Lightning was staggering around carrying a home air conditioner. Calkoro rushed up to her and supported it from the side. Lightning blinked. You could practically hear her long eyelashes making noise.

"Oh my, teacher. Should you be helping?"

"You seemed like you were about to hurt yourself, so I had to... Please leave it at that."

"You're surprisingly flexible. Thanks."

Normally, even a single very casual smile from her would have some tremendous pressure in it, but that day, there was a line of black dirt on her face that softened the impression she gave. Calkoro responded with a vague smile, and the two of them went off carrying the air conditioner together.

"There's some dirt on your face. Once we're back at the classroom, wipe it off."

"I didn't notice."

She must have been just that absorbed in her task. Thinking about how Lightning was also looking forward to joining in the Founding Festival made her seem somehow cute. Calkoro had

thought that she wasn't very interested in class activities, that she wasn't that fussed about such things, or rather that she was detached from it all. She'd just seemed like a really coolheaded student. But that impression had changed a lot recently.

Rather than Calkoro being a bad judge of people, this had to be a change in Lightning. No matter how mature she seemed, she was still a middle schooler, so of course she would grow through interacting with her classmates. This was actually the way she should be.

Such unusually teacherly thoughts left Calkoro feeling rather moved, and she muttered thoughtlessly, "You've changed, too."

Right after saying that, she nearly stumbled. She looked over to see Lightning had stopped.

"Changed? Me?"

Her gaze bore into Calkoro, her eyes seeming to sparkle under the light of the sun streaming in through the windows. Feeling even more overwhelmed than ever before, Calkoro made the excuse for herself, "Oh no, I didn't mean anything much by it," and then covered it with "Anyway, let's get moving."

Lightning wouldn't be fooled. While she moved her feet, her mouth didn't stop. "Changed as in how? From when did you feel that I've changed? You mean that in a good way, right? I didn't have a bad feeling from it. Why do you think I've changed?"

She fired off questions one after another. Unusually for a girl who rarely showed her feelings, she seemed truly glad. While waving her aside with a noncommittal response, Calkoro quickly arrived at the classroom and prayed that she would be freed. She shouldn't have opened her mouth.

◇ **Thunder-General Adelheid**

Mephis's attitude was strange. The way Lillian was acting was also suspicious. Kumi-Kumi was focused on her task.

Unlike Adelheid, they were all bad at hiding things. They were acting funny because they had something they couldn't say out loud kept in their guts. Making a comparison with her own experiences, Adelheid figured something had happened to them. They had been summoned by Frederica, and most likely they had gotten the same orders as Adelheid. Even if they were members of the same group,

because they were obeying the command not to expose themselves, things had gotten weird.

But this was basically exposing it. Adelheid considered telling them herself instead, but this was ultimately nothing but speculation, and Adelheid would be angry if she got blamed for pointlessly going against orders. And if the other members were blamed, and not just Adelheid, that would be worse than stirring up trouble.

She did consider the option of going through the Archfiend Cram School or the Department of Diplomacy to ask about what was really going on here, but nothing would stop that from just being uncool, like tattling to a parent. And since Adelheid's mother actually was an Archfiend Cram School graduate and a member of the Department of Diplomacy, rather than being *like* tattling to a parent, she would literally be tattling to her parent.

Thinking about what to do while working made her get her fingers stuck in the air conditioner parts. She shook her fingers, saying, *Ow*, but Kumi-Kumi was so intensely focused on taking apart the air conditioner, she didn't even look at Adelheid. She probably hadn't even noticed.

"We have no need of tomorrow." Saying something that Adelheid felt she'd heard somewhere before, Kana offered her a bandage.

Which reminded her—Kana should be the student most close to Frederica, but she was acting completely the same as always. She didn't look like the type who could lie, but had she not been given any particular orders? If that were the case, why would only she not be given any orders?

Adelheid looked around. Nobody was paying attention to them. Even Kumi-Kumi was focused on her task, and no voices reached her.

Accepting the bandage, Adelheid asked quietly, "Hey, why were you sent here?"

Kana, who had been peeling the exterior off a heater, stopped her hands, folded her arms, and nodded. "I don't know, either."

"Well...Ah guess that's how it is."

If you were ordered from above, no matter how irrational it was, you had to do it. That didn't just go for magical girls—it was true for all living things.

◇ Mephis Pheles

Apparently, they weren't going to do anything until the Founding Festival, but it wasn't like they could just leave things be. Frederica had revealed to them that "At this rate, we might wind up doing it," so they would have to lend a hand on the Caspar Faction attack on the school. But said major problem had been neglected and was being put off, in which case, it would be best if they could find a way to resolve it by the day of. But since Mephis did not have the wonderful powers of imagination that manga protagonists shared, time simply passed on by.

Already, they had no time, but there were so many things to do. Mephis couldn't be the only one immersing herself in thought while everyone was busily working, so she helped in the tasks so people weren't suspicious of her, and that took her thinking time away. It was irritating, but she couldn't show her irritation.

This was what it was to serve some power and receive pay for it. You were always made to take on responsibility and had your freedom taken from you. Mephis envied Kana for freely going back and forth between the class and the main school to get information, but just as Kana could not be Mephis, Mephis could not be Kana.

The work that day was more irritating than the usual tasks waiting for them. They were heading out to Umemizaki to participate in the Founding Festival Organization Committee, where they would confirm their decisions and get printouts and stuff. Tetty—the student rep and leader of Group One—would go with Mephis and Lightning, the leaders of the other two groups.

Group Two looked very worried. They were practically lecturing her, saying things like, "Make sure not to start fights with the students of Umemizaki" and "No matter what they say, you can't get angry." Mephis yelled at them, saying, "Just what do you think I am?"

Before entering school, Mephis had dyed her hair black, put on some dorky glasses, done her hair in braids, and put on her uniform to regulation, all to fit in with the magical-girl class. Maybe in the end that had been unnecessary effort, but she had smothered her individuality for the sake of the mission. She'd been willing to go that far, so why did they think she would cause problems at Umemizaki? If they were going to worry about anyone, it should be about Lightning.

She looked over to see the members of Group Three were also giving orders like “Don’t do this,” “Don’t do that,” and “Stay quiet as much as possible” to Lightning—or rather, making such requests. Their judgment was far more sound.

In the end, the organizer meeting ended without any particular accidents. Mephis put on a serious look to greet everyone and a serious look to listen to everyone—in other words, she just put on her serious look for the whole thing. The Umemizaki students were focused on Lightning. All Mephis could think was, *Well, of course*. Per her group members’ orders, Lightning didn’t speak more than necessary, but sitting, walking, or whatever she did still drew attention.

Magical girls were beautiful when transformed, and having gone to school with Lightning for a few months, Mephis was used to her. However, anyone else would obviously turn their head to see such a creature out and about.

They heard constant sighs and whispers all through the committee meeting. After it was over, when people came right up to try to speak with her, Mephis bowed her head and pushed her way through them, and by the time she had somehow gotten back to the old school building, she was exhausted. Just thinking about how she would have to do this for every committee meeting, she felt like she couldn’t hack it.

Lightning, the source of these troubles, said, “I’ve got to go help Kumi-Kumi,” and headed to the classroom with a skip in her step.

When Tetty tried to return to the classroom as well, Mephis called her to a stop. “Do you have a minute?”

“Huh? What is it?”

“Hey, don’t you think it’s enough to have just the class rep for this? Umemizaki has one representative per class. Why are we the only ones sending in one rep per group? Next time, you go on your own. You’re not gonna say it’d be too lonely on your own, right?”

Tetty’s eyes widened. She seemed surprised. She drew in a breath and expelled it quietly. “Um, well...it’s kind of like an excuse to bring Lightning.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“The kids from Umemizaki apparently asked if we could somehow bring her along.”

Now that she was hearing it, it sounded so stupid, Mephis had to sigh.

“What the heck... It’s fine, don’t worry about that. Next time, you go alone.”

“Huh? You’re not coming, Mephis?”

“We’re already busy to begin with. We can’t lose a worker.”

“Well, but look, it’s like we were able to participate because of the goodwill of everyone from Umemizaki.” As Tetty was making excuses, for some reason, the corners of her lips went up, and she broke into a smile.

Mephis brought her eyebrows together in suspicion. “...Why do you look glad?”

“Huh? Did I seem glad? Ohh, well, I was just thinking, you were talking to me normally.”

Having that pointed out, now Mephis thought, *Ahh*. Thinking of it now, Mephis and Tetty had that falling out. Lately, there had just been so many things to think about, she’d forgotten about it.

Mephis did understand that if anyone was to blame, it was her, but she still didn’t want to apologize, and so things had dragged on because of her. Her group members, with Adelheid at the top of the list, had gone off about this and that, so she’d gotten stubborn. Seeing Tetty giving in to her like this, Mephis didn’t really get anymore why she had been mad, and she sighed and pushed up her sliding glasses.

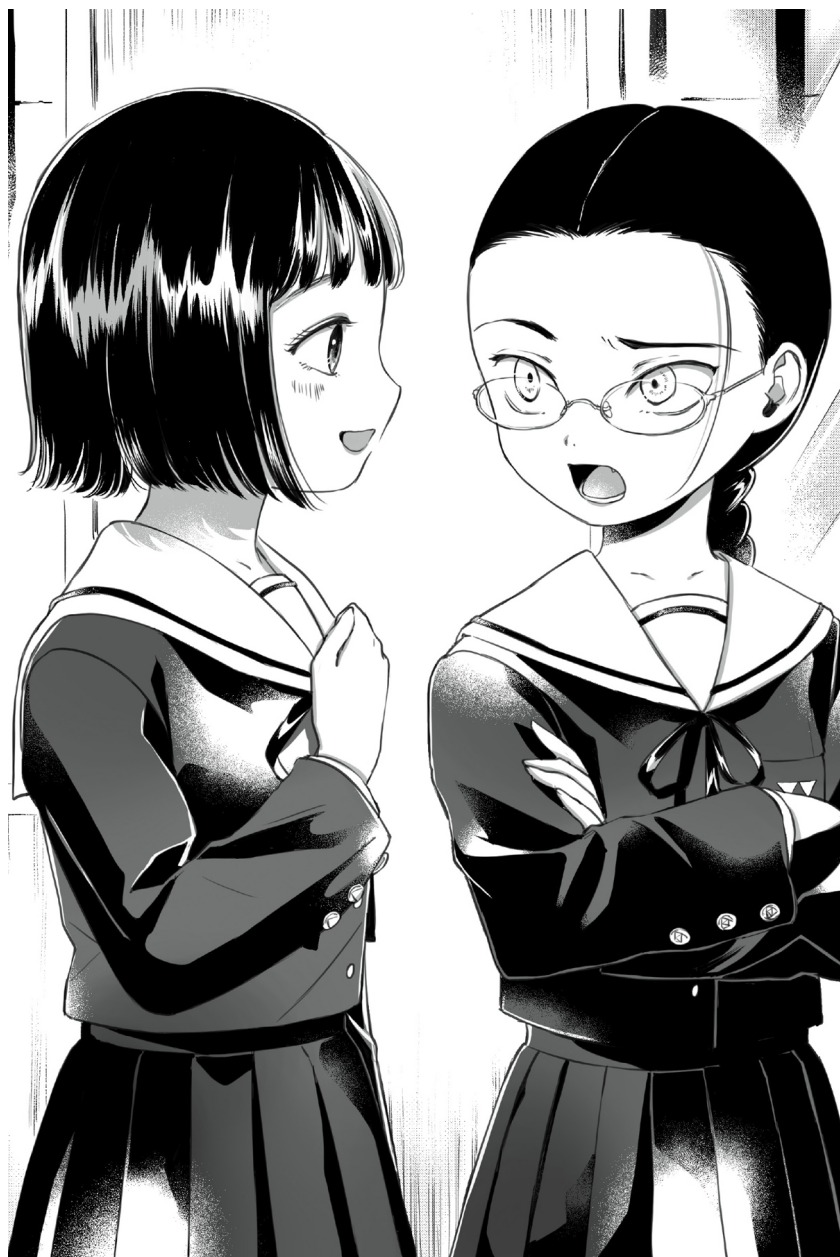
“It’s kind of like,” Mephis began.

“Kind of like? ...Oh, I know, there’s something I wanted to talk to you about.”

“What?”

“About the courtyard.”

Mephis’s back automatically straightened. Tetty sounded excited. She didn’t seem as if she understood just what an important word she’d said.



"We got permission to use the courtyard as a way to and from the shop. It's such a nice place, so I think it will be an added appeal for the customers."

"Permission...from who?"

"The magical-girl class's janitor."

"The janitor? There is one?"

"There is. They often work in the courtyard."

The courtyard was almost certainly the entrance to the ruins, and the ruins were protected. Mephis and her group had been sent to this magical-girl class to steal a relic. If they could steal it, then there would be no attack. Mephis saw her original mission as being to confirm the position of the ruins, sneak inside, and steal it. It wasn't like she'd never considered the possibility there would be an attack then, but now, things were different.

If she could steal it, there would be no attack. The problem was whether she could pull that off.

"...Can we go see it now?" Mephis asked.

"Maybe not right... Oh, wait. Before, they said, why not invite you to the courtyard. So then that means, in other words, that if I'm with you, then you're okay, too...I think?"

"Oh, yeah. That sounds fine. Then could you let me have a peek?" Mephis said with a cool look on her face, but her heart was pounding like never before. If things went well, then she could end everything here. She'd never gotten a chance like this before. Even if it didn't go that well, then she would get information. Even if it wasn't possible now, she might be able to manage somehow before the attack. While glaring at Tetty's back ahead of her, Mephis bit her lower lip hard. If she succeeded, then she couldn't stay in the magical-girl class. But that was clearly better than having an attack. It had to be. Yes, it actually might be best for it to not go too well. It would be good for Mephis to identify the position and an infiltration route, and a different specialist would sneak in and steal it based on that information. Then there was a chance that she could continue to attend the class like before.

They went from the entrance down the roofed corridor between buildings, circling the first floor clockwise to come out in front of the courtyard. Tetty put her hand on the handle, and the heavy-looking metal door smoothly opened. It seemed like there was

magic cast on it. It was probably reacting to Tetty. And now they were going inside the door that Mephis couldn't open.

"Oh, hello."

Now this was trouble. Someone was there already. Tetty was waving her hand. Was this the janitor that she'd talked about? The person who'd been squatting down beyond the shrubbery of the courtyard stood up. They were wearing overalls and had a towel around their neck like a stereotypical janitor. Their hair was pulled back in a tight bun, and the ends of their long ears were pointed. Mephis scowled. She had assumed it was the principal, but looking closely, their face was different. As for why she'd mistaken this person for the principal, aside from having pointed ears, she had the overall slender and elegant face of a lady elf that appeared in stories.

Actually...

She'd seen that face somewhere before. Where had she seen it? The woman reached her left hand out toward her. Mephis felt faint. She couldn't stay on her feet. This was—

"Y'know, I'm glad we could make up."

"Ahhh, well...oh."

Walking side by side down the hallway, Mephis smiled on the left side of her face, on the side that Tetty couldn't see. She hadn't simply smiled because she was glad—she was smiling at how carefree Tetty was, seemingly not caring about the reason why Mephis would come to talk to her like it was nothing.

But it wasn't like she wasn't glad at all.

"That reminds me..." Tetty began.

"What?"

"Ummm...what was it again? I thought there was something I was going to say to you."

"Some more pointless crap? You really haven't changed. Never mind that; just tell me if you remember. More importantly, let's get back to the classroom. Lightning went straight back, and she's probably already working. It'll get on my nerves if we're late and she thinks we're slacking off."

The two of them walked faster, heading to the classroom.

The next day, the whole class knew that when they'd had the Founding Festival committee meeting, Mephis and Tetty accomplished a historical reconciliation. The reason for their reconciliation was unknown. When Miss Ril asked Tetty, she said, "I don't really know," and when Adelheid asked Mephis, she went "Shaddap." If Kana asked, her magic would give her an answer, but that would be too crude.

It seemed something had happened on the way back from the committee meeting at the moment that Princess Lightning had gone. Having missed that scene, Lightning said, "I should have stayed a little longer instead of hurrying back." She was frustrated in her own way.

Kana thought to ask Mephis after they went home, but since Kana's magic would activate if she formed a question, she was unable to ask. Simply touching on the matter without asking questions made Mephis get rapidly grumpier, and sensing her foul mood, Kana gave up on the issue of the Mephis-Tetty reconciliation.

Kana was curious about the details, but it wasn't as if she could know everything in the world. There were quite a few things that she would have to give up on. Instead, she should be glad of their reconciliation and at her own growth for having picked up on Mephis's mood.

At the end of the day, so long as they had made up, then things were good. And if that caused things to go better in the magical-girl class, then everyone would benefit. Of course, Kana would be included among them. *This "Kana is included, too" part is nice*, she thought as she bit into her dinner pastry. Her smiling creeped Mephis out.

While she did make some mistakes, things generally went well. If things continued to go like this, then surely the Founding Festival would go well, too. The next day, they had their classes, helped carry things during breaks, and during recreation time, they taste-tested the ramen.

"Every time I try this, I make new discoveries. I've realized that this flavor seems bad for your health," said Mephis.

"Ya cain't give a better review than that? If ya say that, my senior'll cry."

She was quickly dismissed from the role of taste-testing and went to help Kumi-Kumi instead. Being always in magical-girl form, she was stronger than her classmates—obviously. For tasks that

required strength, such as taking apart machines or compressing plastic bottles, Kana was unrivaled. Strictly speaking, maybe this was going against the rule that they were not to use magical-girl abilities, but if you were going to be such a stickler for the rules, then Kana alone would be unable to participate, so everyone ignored this—there was no declaration that they were ignoring it, but well, Kana figured that was the case, and she was grateful to her classmates and their kindness.

The production of the art piece, with Kumi-Kumi in charge, progressed and grew deeper with each passing day. Their dragon made of trash items seemed so lively it might start moving any minute.

“It’s turned out wonderfully,” said Kana. “There was nothing this great in prison.”

“That doesn’t...feel...like a compliment...”

“How strange. I meant that very much as high praise.”

After finishing her school lunch without delay, Kana ran at full speed to the Umemizaki main school. It was impossible for a human to see Kana while she was in motion, but if she slowed down and someone questioned her while she was stopped, that was bound to lead to the discovery of the magical girls, so she made perfectly sure that nobody was looking first before stopping. Such worries were so very magical girl-ish; Kana felt that she had grown from being a lawless prisoner and nodded to herself.

“Ohhh, Kana. Welcome.”

“Mm, hello.”

“How are things going over there? Are they going well?”

“I’m thinking that ramen may just be bad for your health.”

“Well, it’s not very healthy...but it tastes good.”

“You don’t think it’s rather too decadent to risk your life to indulge in the gourmet?”

“Do you have to be that dramatic about it?”

At Umemizaki Junior High, she was able to get along particularly well with the students of class 2-C. She paid the finest attention to their discussions to avoid exposing that she was no ordinary human, so she couldn’t speak frankly and openly like with the magical-girl class. But the students here were overflowing with even more information unknown to Kana compared to the magical-girl class, and there were lots to enjoy. She could spend the whole break just talking with them.

When she was asking them about the power source of a cardboard box roller coaster, her magical phone vibrated to give her an alert. There were a lot of standee-types outside the class watching and whispering, and she couldn't pull out her magical phone while they were looking. Kana said, "Pardon me a moment," and left, and moving swiftly, she passed through the standees to come out to an empty stair landing and pull out her magical phone.

She had received a message from Yoshioka. This was her first contact since she had come to the magical-girl class. It read:

We are about to visit in great numbers, so please be good and lie low so you don't get hurt.

CHAPTER 8

MIDDAY PARTY

◇ Lapis Lazuline the Third

When Lazuline the First got a contact from the team that was monitoring Umemizaki Junior High with a report that “the Caspar Faction is making their move,” she gave instructions, just like originally planned. They would not be allotting additional forces to the magical-girl class—they would entrust it to Ranyi, Diko, and Princess Lightning, and the main force, an elite team of a few dozen composed largely of Lazuline candidates, would be a couple dozen miles away from Umemizaki, charging into the Caspar Faction headquarters, a mansion in a certain suburb. Their goal was the head of Frederica, who was staying behind there.

Around her, all the members of the team were busily working. Naturally—they were about to launch a raid. While everyone around them was scurrying about, teacher and student, Old Blue and Lazuline the Third, were sitting opposite each other in the department head office enjoying black tea and sweets.

“I feel bad taking it easy having teatime when everyone is so busy,” said Lazuline.

“We’ll be busy soon enough. We’re just taking it easy now because we’ve already prepared.”

Even though it was the middle of the afternoon on a weekday and still a day until the Founding Festival, Frederica had set things in motion. Her master’s prediction that if they set up something as convenient as the Founding Festival, then Frederica would pick another time had been correct. But if they had informed the others and made it an order, then Frederica may have caught on and changed her course. So her master had figured they should not tell anyone else, even if things got into a bit of a flurry, while privately

getting themselves ready.

“Worst case, I don’t mind if the relic is stolen from the ruins,” said Old Blue. “So long as Frederica is eliminated, even misuse of the relic has been planned for.”

“Shouldn’t we focus our forces on defending the magical-girl class?” Lazuline asked. That was essentially an indirect protest against making the class a decoy.

But her master shook her head with a smile. “If Frederica is left alive, in the end, we’ll end up right back where we started. My ultimate goal is to secede from the Magical Kingdom and destroy the magical-girl system... Frederica will absolutely try to prevent that.”

Her expression turned serious a moment before returning to a smile. “Besides, I don’t think what you’re imagining will happen.”

“What am I imagining?”

“You’re thinking the class is to be a decoy or left to die, aren’t you? I’m sure that won’t happen. You’re misjudging the strength of your friends who were sent to the magical-girl class. You’re underestimating them.”

“I’m not...”

Or maybe I am, she thought, and closed her mouth. But Frederica had sent in a lineup good enough to be in the magical-girl class, too. They were surely capable mercenaries. She wouldn’t say that Ranyi and Diko were weak, but compared with hardworking pros on the front lines—and the upper strata among those—they weren’t good enough yet.

Watching Lazuline, for some reason, her master nodded like she was amused. “Their strength is the real thing—especially Princess Lightning. Though it seems you can’t bring yourself to like her.”

“I wouldn’t say that.”

“Not fond of her origins?”

“That’s not it at all.”

No magical girl under Lazuline’s banner was blessed in the area of family. It was on the better side if both their parents were dead—most of these magical girls had been kicked out or nearly killed or sold off before being taken in by the First.

Of these girls, Princess Lightning had a particularly tragic history. She had been a literal product. She was a designer child created by a mage with an addled sense of ethics—she was a human developed to be like a pet, made with the goal of being as beautiful

as possible. Since she had been unfit as a product, she eventually wound up with her master.

Her background wasn't the reason Lazuline didn't like her. Lazuline didn't feel sorry for her, but neither did she dislike her because her origins were different from others'.

Until now, Lazuline had felt the reason she didn't like her was rather hard to put into words. But those remarks from her master enabled her to finally hit on it. What she didn't like was her master's stance toward her.

As for whether she knew how Lazuline felt—well, she probably did. She was that sort of girl.

Smile still on her face, her master continued. "The Princess Plan came to fruition with Lightning—combined with the essentials of artificial magical girls that were received from elsewhere. She's different from earlier artificial magical girls... No, she is different from every magical girl, myself included. With them handling the school, we don't need to worry."

"Okay. Well, if you say so, then all I can say is, all right, then. But did you know that there's something else that I'm far more worried about?"

"Oh? What are you worried about?"

"Master, there's no need for you to go out along with us. It's pointlessly dangerous, and I think it would be best if you quietly hid in the R&D Department or at some hideout."

"I can't do that." With a gentle smile, Old Blue firmly shook her head. "It would actually be dangerous for me *not* to go."

"You mean that you can't leave it to your students, is that it?"

Her master did not reply, letting her fork sink into her mille-feuille. The cake was cleanly cut in half without any resistance, the round slice of lemon included. Stabbing her divided mille-feuille with a fork, she brought it to her mouth and ate it with relish. Seeing that drew Lazuline to eat her own mille-feuille as well.

"Frederica will have anticipated that I will attack the Caspar Faction headquarters when their protections are thin, with their forces sent to the magical-girl class. That might even be the reason for this sudden attack on the class—she's thinking to lure out her sworn enemy Lapis Lazuline the First, and to that end deliberately leaving her headquarters bare to make herself seem weak there."

Lazuline was about to say, *If you understand all that, then isn't that all the more reason you shouldn't go?* But the mille-feuille got in

the way, and all she could do was mumble around the food. There was no way her master could have heard what she'd said, but she nodded regardless.

"Frederica is making herself a decoy in order to lure me out. And I am also a decoy. Though I would be slightly safer if I concealed myself, when Frederica realizes that, she might disappear, figuring there is no point in making herself a decoy."

When it came down to it, her master was saying that she and Frederica were making each other hostages, collateral in a deadly fight. Lazuline snorted. *I wish adults would act their age*, she thought as she swallowed the mille-feuille she'd been chewing.

◇ Pythie Frederica

"And so this place will likely be attacked."

Asmona, sitting on the other side of the table, made no comment and did not nod, just looking back at Frederica. She wasn't trying to hide her sincere exasperation. She slowly shook her head, adjusted the position of her glasses, and sighed deeply. "Is that what an adult does?"

"It's what a magical girl does."

"It's not as if magical girls are allowed to do anything they please."

"I don't believe at all that this is *allowed*."

"You should consider the trouble you cause for others. I don't even want to think about how many people will die."

"Let's both do our best not to be added to the register of the dead...besides."

"Besides?"

"Mephis Pheles has been replaced. This is the third."

Asmona's nostrils flared as she exhaled. "...And Adelheid?"

"She's still safe, but I don't know for how long. I've judged that rather than standing idly by as my forces dwindle, I should cause trouble myself."

"But...if that's the case, then some more defense... I know, we can still put up a barrier now."

"That wouldn't make it in time. For a siege, the castle is always at the advantage. I have already set up some traps, and if they do anything boorish such as dropping bombs with bombers, for

example, or sending in magical girls carrying bombs to blow it up from the inside—we have countermeasures for that, which should be enough. We are prepared so that there should be no problems for magical girls to have a large-scale battle.”

Asmona took off her glasses, placed them on the table, looked up at the ceiling, massaged the line in her brow, and sighed again. This sigh was bigger than the first.

She turned back to Frederica and thrust her index finger at her. It was a rude gesture for her, but it only gave Frederica a sense of satisfaction, and she responded with a smile.

“Was there something?” Frederica asked.

“You’re crazy.”

“That’s not true at all. They’re going to be thinking the same things as they come to attack.”

“What is with you people? It seems you understand each other quite a bit. It’s gross.”

“I believe that people of poor character will understand one another rather well.”

“If you get along that well, then shouldn’t you work together to go up against the Magical Kingdom?”

“Unfortunately, it’s such a relationship that does not allow both parties to live.”

“Ridiculous.”

“It is ridiculous indeed, but it is also a realistic threat.”

“Now I can finally understand why I was left behind here. I kept thinking for sure that you would have me go to the magical-girl class.”

Frederica *did* have a plan to send Asmona to the school since due to circumstances, she hadn’t been able to use Amy and Monako, who she’d originally been going to send. While the pair were lovably capricious, that was also the reason they were difficult to handle.

It was regrettable that she couldn’t use them anymore. But she couldn’t spend all her time on regrets.

A fight between magical girls with hopeful futures and that pair of brutes would certainly have been fun, but unfortunately, she had been forced to give up on it. And though she had considered the matter, she had come to think that using Asmona in place of Amy and Monako would be a bad idea. They had different roles, to begin with. If Amy and Monako were not there, then there was nothing

for it but to make things work out without them. She had other aces up her sleeve, though said aces were rather dubious.

Frederica waved her hand in front of her face. “No, no, I can’t say you’ve fully understood it. I wouldn’t put you to waste by leaving you behind as a mere guard.”

Even now, she remembered in detail. Surely, she would not forget her whole life long the blue magical girl who had fought the enemies in front of the ruins Puk Puck occupied. Her polished martial arts, exceptional physicality, the magic that ended her opponents with a touch—she had reached the heights with a different approach from “strong magical girls,” such as the Sage incarnations or those of the Archfiend Cram School. Frederica had found out after the fact that she was the new Lazuline. That had more than made sense.

While part of Frederica had been like a young child watching a movie fight scene with sweat clenched in her hands, the dirty, adult part of her had been coolly evaluating her. If she went up against her in the future, then she had to come up with some counterstrategy, or she would most definitely get hurt. It would be a waste to deal with her before it turned into a fight. For a magical girl like that, her beauty was perfected by being dealt with in battle.

“Most likely, their best assassin will be sent to me, Pythie Frederica. Lapis Lazuline the Third. I just happened to run into her fighting, but she stole my eyes and my heart. Trying to take her with numbers will just lead to more pointless deaths. To do something against that, you need the same sort of monster. The Great Adulteress Asmona, the oldest student of Archfiend Pam, one of the most feared in the Archfiend Cram School, and one of the Seven Great Devils, will surely make it a good fight. And on top of her strength, she’s wonderfully devoted to the mission. She won’t run away even if she’s at a bit of a disadvantage.”

That could also be taken as “it’s great that you can use her as a sacrificial piece,” but that wasn’t what Frederica really meant, and Asmona would understand, too. What Frederica really meant was that she wanted to try making two really strong magical girls fight. Once she actually made them fight, she had no idea which would win. It wouldn’t be strange if they had a long fight that came out to a draw, and it also wouldn’t be strange if the match ended in an instant. That was what made it fun.

Asmona sighed again and put her glasses back on, set her hand

on the brim of her newsboy cap, and pulled it down lower. Looking at Frederica with resentment from her upturned eyes, she groaned something.

Noticing that she was shy at having been praised, Frederica pinched the back of her right hand in order to restrain the smile inside her.

◇ Thunder-General Adelheid

When she received the message from Frederica, she thought for sure that it had to be a joke or something. Frederica could be nasty sometimes and enjoyed seeing other people panic. Adelheid didn't imagine there was anyone who would say seriously, *"We're going to attack the magical-girl class in the middle of the day, so please back me up,"* when there was a huge crowd of people at the Umemizaki main school as well.

Getting a ping on her magical phone, Adelheid left the classroom alone and went to sit down on the stairs of an empty landing, reading over the message she had been sent many times. While sitting on the step, she transformed into magical-girl form. She wanted to believe that it was a joke, but Pythie Frederica was mysterious and unfathomable, so she figured it wouldn't be strange for her to do it.

She wanted to hold her head in her hands, but she saved her sigh and called out down the hall. "Do ya have business with me? Ah'm busy right now."

The other also wasn't trying to hide their footsteps. Adelheid could identify the footsteps of each and every girl in their class. It was just exactly who she'd expected: Classical Lillian, and she was already transformed when she popped her head out. "You ran out into the hallway pale-faced, so I followed you."

She hadn't meant to show it on her face. She'd thought she was controlling her feelings better than certain other classmates who wore their hearts on their sleeves, but apparently that had just been in her head. Embarrassed and *trying* not to change her expression or her attitude, she looked at Lillian. When Lillian was transformed, she was so calm, you wouldn't imagine that she was normally so constantly jumpy.

"Ah cain't have ya followin' me."

“Did something happen?”

“Huh? Did nothin’ happen with you?”

“Nothing in particular. So then what happened?”

It seemed like it would be difficult to hide it any further. With a grim look, Adelheid plucked her magical phone with her middle finger, index finger, and thumb, and held it out to Lillian.

Lillian looked at the screen for a while, squeezed her eyes shut, and slowly opened them again. “There has been no reaction from Mephis or Kumi-Kumi. It seems they haven’t been contacted. Judging from how things have been lately, it appears certain they were given similar instructions as us, but for some reason, now they’ve been left out... I haven’t gotten such a notification, either.”

“Ah don’t get it. Ah cain’t understand what’s goin’ on.”

She had no idea why she was the only one getting a message. She hadn’t even been instructed to do it without the three members of the Elite Guard. Just what was going on with the upper ranks?

“Ah don’t get it...but there’s no time. We’ve just got to do our job.”

“In that case, doing our job basically means *that*, doesn’t it?”

This meant backing up whoever had come to steal the relic hidden in the ruins. Whichever of them did that, whether it be Adelheid or Lillian, it would essentially be robbery. In other words, they would be unable to come back to the magical-girl class.

Of course, they had joined the class with that intention. They had been aware this was infiltration. They should still be thinking of it like that, but she hated the weak-willed, sensitive parts of her that would think, if she let them, that this was regrettable. Plenty of unpleasant things had happened—getting beaten by Groups One or Three during recreation time, having Lightning steal her dessert during lunch, getting dragged into a fight between Arlie and Dory and falling down, how all of Calkoro’s classes were boring—so Adelheid hadn’t assumed the Founding Festival would be fun. But she still found this regrettable, even though a proper mercenary magical girl should obviously be able to instantly attack someone she’d been chatting pleasantly with a second ago, if needed.

With a feeling like she was punching the weakness inside her, Adelheid firmed up her expression and nodded, saying, “That’s basically what it means. Will ya be able to do yer job, Lillian?”

“I’ll do it.” Lillian’s agreement cut her off. There was a harshness in her expression that was different from the

transcendentally soft expression she had when she transformed.

Feeling a little overwhelmed, Adelheid waited a beat, then right when she was about to speak, she heard a voice from the classroom. It was a scream. The two of them raced out toward the classroom without a word.

◇ Calkoro

Calkoro was getting tired of seeing her students at work, so she was zoning out and looking outside. Considering her proper function, she should be watching the classroom, but that made her feel constrained. She had to have the freedom to look at birds flying in the sky and think about them with an envying sigh, or she wouldn't be able to manage.

So Calkoro noticed before her students. Before her eyes, the color of the sky turned to black charcoal, and beyond the net on the school field, the road and residential area became hazy, as if seen through mist. She didn't know what had happened, but she knew *something* had happened. If not for the incident where the homunculi had gone out of control, then she may have dithered, but now things were different. Calkoro immediately rose to her feet, transforming as she did, and faced the students.

"Everyone, transform!"

All the students were looking at her. They had yet to transform. They stared at her in shock. Turning around, Calkoro pulled out her abacus, but the intruder who broke the window to come in casually blocked it with her right hand alone.

It was a magical girl. Her costume was fluttering with frills. But on her face was a plastic mask, like the sort a child would pester their parents to buy them at a festival—it was probably some magical girl from an anime—to hide her identity.

More made to come in from behind her, with the same magical-girl masks hiding their faces. Calkoro was confused, but her body responded. She went to stomp on the foot of the one who'd blocked her abacus—her opponent dodged and kicked at her with the same foot. Calkoro shielded herself with her abacus but failed to brace herself with her left leg, and even that light kick was incredibly powerful. She was thrown backward, but someone broke her fall.

She looked up. She could see the jaw of Tetty, who had caught

her. The line of her jaw was beautiful. She had transformed into a magical girl.

“Who are you people?!” Tetty asked, but nobody replied.

The masked magical girls swung up staffs or clasped both fists and held them at the ready in front of them as they came forward. The next thing she knew, Snow White was thrusting forward with a weapon like a *naginata*, and when a stick struck her from the side, Rappy unfurled her magic wrap to block it for her. Dory charged in with a wild shriek, and Arlie followed Snow White’s lead to go for the enemies.

“Piece of shit!” Pshuke cursed as she fired her water gun blindly, spraying a silver liquid at the enemies. The diffused liquid was difficult to evade, but the enemies swept their staffs, twisted around, or created shields in front of them, and not a single one was struck by the attack. In fact, since it was sprayed in every direction, the liquid hit Miss Ril in the back of the head, and the silver drops dribbled down her body.

Miss Ril staggered and melted into the same silver as the liquid. It was the worst misfire—not. After getting hit by Pshuke’s mercury, Miss Ril had activated her magic and turned herself into mercury to crawl around on the floor of the classroom while she attacked the enemies’ feet.

A makeshift formation took shape—with Arlie, Rappy, and Tetty at the front as the shield as Snow White and Dory thrust from behind; near the ceiling, Sally’s crows looked for openings from above; and from below, the protean Miss Ril attacked their feet as Pshuke tried sniping them from the very back.

While calculating, Calkoro chanted spells, but before her spell could complete, she noticed the enemies were getting passive. Even after Tetty crushed a staff that swung down on her in her hands, the enemy wasn’t particularly rattled, just moving to the rear to prepare for the next attack. In addition to that, the stones of her magic abacus clicked along, and she quickly derived the answer.

Are they buying time...?

An incredible *boom* that sounded like an explosion shook the school building. Dust fluttered down from the fluorescent light covers. The magical girls strengthened their offensive, but the enemy’s defensive formation was tenacious, never taking a fatal hit as they gradually backed up toward the window of the classroom.

What were they buying time for? They were most likely after

the ruins, but there was no time for that. All the magical girls attacking the class were strong. They didn't simply have excellent physical abilities—Calkoro could sense their experience. They were responding to the students' magic calmly, too. It could be assumed that they'd looked into all of them beforehand. This wasn't a sudden act of violence—this was a planned attack on the school, terrorism.

Calkoro mulled over all this. There was nobody protecting the ruins right now—no, there were the students who had left: Lightning, Mephis, Kumi-Kumi, Ranyi, Diko, and the dragon art piece that Kumi-Kumi had been making had all vanished at some point. She thought it was odd that those kids would dash off right as the enemy appeared, so maybe they'd gone to strike back at some enemies who'd attacked from another angle.

This did seem too convenient, but she just had to cling to that hope right now. Was the principal safe? If the enemy had headed to the principal's office as well, then not being a magical girl, Halna would be helpless. And if Halna lost her life, even if Calkoro safely made it through this battle, most certainly nothing good would happen.

There was no point in thinking any more. Calkoro's mission was to drive away the enemy, protect the ruins and Halna, and keep the students safe if possible while resolving this situation. She stopped chanting. With magical girls fighting at high speed, the chant of a mage was despairingly slow, but being a magical-girl-slash-mage, Calkoro's rapid chanting was effective.

Calkoro charged up powers of sleep and fainting in her palm, but right before she could fling it at the enemies' faces, the enemy group leaped out the window like the tide receding, and Calkoro's magic lost its target.

The timing was just too good. Did that mean her guess that the enemy had looked into the students also applied to Calkoro? That course of action would make sense if they'd checked the types of spells she was good at, as a magical girl who used mages' magic.

No. This wasn't the time to think about that. The enemy had finally showed a weakness. She should take advantage of this opportunity.

"Everyone! Withdraw for the moment and move to the first floor!"

Strangely colorful apples were tossed in from outside one after another, and a beat later, the whole area exploded.

◇ Ranyi

Some of the girls moved backward at the same moment as the enemies attacked. With a hand signal from Lightning, Ranyi left the classroom with Diko, and a little after, Mephis and Kumi-Kumi also emerged in the hall.

“Why did you two leave, too?” Lightning asked with a grace that completely clashed with the situation.

Mephis answered with a click of her tongue. “Adelheid and Lillian just left the classroom. I’m gonna call for them.”

“To what end? Aren’t the people who just came your allies?”

Mephis’s expression clouded in confusion. Diko slightly narrowed her right eye. That was evidence that she felt something was off.

The tone of Lightning’s voice lowered. “Oh my, they’re really not yours?”

“I dunno. What about you guys?”

“Of course we don’t know.”

The two of them glared at each other—but really it was just Mephis one-sidedly glaring, while it was more accurate to say that Lightning was closely eyeing Mephis’s face, rudely and with deep interest. Kumi-Kumi quietly cleared her throat. She had a large package wrapped in a cloth on her back. From the gaps in the cloth, you could see the aforementioned dragon art piece. She apparently hadn’t abandoned it, even at a time like this.

“We don’t...have the time...to stand here...and talk...”

“Yeah, that’s right.” Mephis peeled her gaze away from Lightning as if she’d just remembered that and ran off, while Kumi-Kumi followed, swinging her pickax, and Lightning quickly kept up. And since they were going, Ranyi also had to go. She heard footsteps coming from behind, which meant Diko was coming, too. Ranyi sighed in relief so that no one could hear.

“Why’re you following me?!” Mephis yelled with annoyance.

“We can do what we please!” Lightning yelled back gleefully.

Were they going to fight again? And if that happened, what should Ranyi do? They had no time to think about it, and after turning a corner, they saw two magical girls running toward them. It was Adelheid and Lillian. The two of them looked at the others with startled expressions and came to a halt.

“Hold on a minute, ’ere!”

Acquiescing to Adelheid's demand, Mephis stopped. There were about ten steps between them. Mephis did pause, but she seemed dissatisfied.

"Why're we waiting?"

"Why are y'all together?"

"They just went and followed us." Mephis jabbed behind her with her right thumb. Being pointed at, Ranyi couldn't really say anything. She didn't know Lightning's true intentions, so she really did wonder why they were with her. But it would be a disgrace if she were the only one confused, so she managed to put on a confident expression as she folded her arms behind Mephis. This one gesture from Ranyi made Adelheid's brow furrow, and she clicked her tongue.

"Hey, bitch, you just clicked your tongue at me," Mephis snapped at her.

"It's just some tongue clickin', let it go."

"Hey, Adelheid." Lightning cut in on Mephis and Adelheid's conversation. "Some rough folks have showed up at the classroom—are they some of yours?"

Adelheid got an expression as if she'd had something nasty-tasting forced into her mouth.

Before Ranyi could figure out what that expression meant, Lightning laughed elegantly. "That look. It seems you do know them. So then you're also in cahoots with the burglars? And if we were to beat you down here and now, then we would be on the side of justice."

Adelheid opened her mouth to reply, but this time Kumi-Kumi cut in. "Wait...what does that mean? I haven't heard...anything about that."

"Don't give me this shit," Mephis spat. "Give me a proper explanation for what's going on, dumbass."

The words were caught in Adelheid's throat. She wasn't sure what to say, or how. And her hesitation made the others even more emotional. Mephis yelled, Kumi-Kumi pressed her, and Lightning shrugged her shoulders and laughed.

"Hold on there."

All attention went to Ranyi. Satisfied with that, Ranyi pointed with a palm at Adelheid and Lillian. "Whatever's going on, first, we should ask what their situation is. Everyone keeps interrupting, and Adelheid can't talk anymore."

“What sort of excuse could she possibly have?” said Lightning. “If she’s connected to the thieves, that’s unacceptable right there. And it’s no concern of mine if Mephis and Kumi-Kumi haven’t been informed on things.”

“Well, that’s, uh, but sometimes you can’t know unless you ask...probably.” Ranyi wasn’t seriously trying to defend Adelheid. It was just that it felt dangerous for this arguing back and forth to go on, with the slight added spice of, *Adelheid looks just like I normally do when she doesn’t know what to say*, and as a result, she’d wound up defending her.

Either because of Ranyi’s statement or having other intentions, everyone fell silent for the moment and looked at Adelheid. Adelheid blew a sigh, put her right hand on the hilt of her military saber and her left on the back of her head to scratch it, then shook her head like a small child going, “No, no, no.”

“Ah got a message. Sayin’ they’re comin’ here now.”

They heard the piercing *boom* of an explosion that made the whole school building shudder. It was in the classroom. That grabbed Ranyi’s attention, but not everyone else’s. Princess Lightning covered ten steps worth of distance in a split second, swinging her lightning sword down on Adelheid while Adelheid blocked that with her military saber.

“You really are with the thieves,” said Lightning.

Lightning shone around the two of them, making crackling sounds. Mephis ran, Diko came forward to block her way, and Ranyi moved to restrain Lillian. Kumi-Kumi alone seemed confused, looking around at her classmates.

Lightning muttered, “Plasma Ball.”

All at once, the lightning that was flickering between Lightning and Adelheid grew in every way—brightness, size, sound—and the magical girls around them who had been about to start a fight, the confused Kumi-Kumi included, all leaped to escape the area of effect.

◇ Halna Midi Meren

Getting attacked before the Founding Festival began—and during the middle of the day, too—was completely unexpected. Apparently, Halna’s assumption that even outlaws had to possess

enough intellect to calculate profit and loss had been an overestimation. It was the height of madness to charge down a path that would lead straight to destruction just to try to take them mildly by surprise.

When Halna noticed the attack, she attempted to contact the outside—which of course failed, leaving her angry. If they were going to set things up beforehand so that they couldn't contact the outside, then they should have attacked at a time that had greater odds of success—but they were incorrigible in all respects.

It was very difficult to maintain her composure while she was mad, but once you were used to it—and with Halna's talent—it was nothing much. Even angry, she would aim for the optimal course of action. It was clear that the enemy's goal was the courtyard, and the ruins that it led to, but it was very plausible that while they were at it they would make to occupy the principal's office. It would be a bad idea to stay here. She would be in trouble if large numbers burst in, and if they threw in a bomb or something from the outside, she wouldn't stand a chance.

First, Halna left the principal's office. Whether she went right or left down the hallway, it would lead to the courtyard, but she heard footsteps from the right side, so she ran to the left. The footsteps were following her. They were running. There were lots of them. Halna's boots were spelled to speed up her running, but she obviously wouldn't be fast enough against a magical girl. Something was shot toward her, and the robe protecting her back shone blindingly. There were further flashes in succession. There was a lot of protection magic worked into it, but if it got hit that much, she didn't know how long it would hold.

She just ran. She didn't look back. The sound of footsteps did not recede—in fact, they were getting closer. Her enemies possessed far stronger physical capabilities. Her robe continued to flash without pause, and then after one final great beaming glow, it crumbled into rags and fell. The final attack had not been a projectile weapon. One of them had run up to her and struck her from behind. The enemy was right there. Halna leaped forward. She held up her hand to the entrance of the courtyard, opening the door and tumbling inside. She did a forward roll over the paving stones and hit her back on the trunk of a flowering dogwood tree.

“Oh, you showed us in.”

“What an idiot.”

Turning back to the vulgar jeers that struck her from behind, she hid her face with her palm and yelled, “Stop this foolish nonsense! Are you trying to start a fight with the Information Bureau?!”

The response to her paltry threat was loud and scornful laughter.

“How dumb can you get?”

“You’re gonna die.”

“Try fighting ’til the end. Though it’s pointless.”

“Ah-ha-ha!”

There were three magical girls with masks. Even if they were hiding their faces, their lack of class was apparent from their voices and attitudes. They made Halna all the more sure that what she was trying to do was not wrong. It was because these sorts of degenerate magical girls were throwing their weight around like they owned the place that a magical-girl class was needed. She would cultivate real magical girls who could do what was right in the right way—not sadistic outlaws who loved to bully the weak or a vanguard of a faction who could only see their own advancement. She would not let the tragedy that the Musician of the Forest, Cranberry, had caused ever happen again. Imitators would all be eliminated.

She would do anything for that sake. She could accept sacrifices. Even if a hundred died now, if that meant a million would be saved in the future, then that was no waste. That would be fortunate for those sacrificed, too.

The villainous magical girls cackled. They were forgetting that they needed to finish off their opponent quickly. Or rather—they had been made to forget that. Halna slowly stood up and walked toward them, but they didn’t even respond.

The courtyard, which Halna had taken great pains to make, was a magic forest. Only when inside here, all spells could be completed without chanting or gesture.

She wasn’t sure what the enemy’s numbers were right now, so to avoid even the slightest consumption of her energies, she was not using any magic to finish them off. She pulled out a spell-conferred knife and sliced the throats of the smiling magical girls, one by one. Not even aware that their allies were being killed, the magical girls fell one after another to lie facedown in pools of blood.

No one but Halna knew the secret of this place. There was a barrier erected around the courtyard, and observation from the

outside was impossible. The mental defense spell kept information from being transmitted to Snow White, too. The details were even a secret from the Information Bureau. It was a secret among secrets.

Returning to the entrance, she sealed it once more. It wasn't an absolute defense, but it would buy her some time.

Halna took off her glasses, carefully wiped off the blood spatter with the sleeve of her robe, approached some lilac bushes, and squatted down. Sweeping away the dirt from its roots, she exposed a metal lid, put her hand there to undo the seal, and opened it. She picked up the receiver that was among the equipment there, extended the cord, and brought it to her mouth. Now she had a basic broadcast room.

She didn't need any incantations or gestures so long as she was in the courtyard, but casting would still tire her out. It wasn't as if she could freely make use of any great magic. So her spells were limited to combat ones, and that meant that Halna alone wouldn't be enough. If the enemy hadn't been interested in engaging her in conversation, then she probably would have been dead now. She needed a protector who would guard her from enemy attacks—even temporarily.

◇ Kumi-Kumi

Mephis blocked Diko's roundhouse kick with the tail in her hair, then slid into range and thrust up at her jaw from below with the heel of her palm, which Diko squatted down to evade, keeping the momentum of her roundhouse kick going to try to sweep her legs out from under her—Mephis popped a leg up and caught her with the sole of her foot. Even as the pair went back and forth, the two magical girls never stopped running, weaving between trees, going along the old school building to head for the classroom.

Kumi-Kumi thrust her pickax at Ranyi, holding her off, but she knew that Ranyi was quick, and right now the package on her back was in the way. She struck her pickax in the ground to shower her with earth that she changed with her magic into square throwing stones, but Ranyi easily dodged. Since they each knew each other's physical abilities and magic, they weren't even surprised. Mephis and Diko's fight was just like an extension of recreation time, too. The pair that had clashed the most during their class recreation

time had been Mephis, the kamikaze commander of Group Two, and Diko, Group Three's resident violence expert.

Ranyi stepped from side to side, feinting once before using a low kick to keep her back.

Kumi-Kumi jumped way back, put out her palm, and stopped. "...Wait."

"Wait? For what?" she said, but she wasn't as aggressive as her words. Ranyi also stopped, watching to see what Kumi-Kumi would do.

"There's...no reason...for us...to fight."

"Like she said, you're connected with the thieves."

"I'm not...connected. The only ones...who were notified...were Lillian and Adelheid."

Turning to Mephis and Diko, who were continuing to strike each other, Kumi-Kumi put a hand by her mouth. That meant turning her back to Ranyi, but she chose deliberately to do so. If Ranyi would hesitate over this, then she wouldn't attack.

"Diko! Mephis! Stop it! There's no...reason...for us to fight!"

Both their arms and legs stopped, and they looked toward Kumi-Kumi. They didn't seem suspicious or like they were restraining anger. The looks on their faces said, *"Well yeah, I know that."*

Feeling she was getting a good response, Kumi-Kumi continued. "Mephis...and I...weren't contacted... We have...nothing to do with it. It's obvious at a glance...from how Mephis acted...that she had no idea...what Adelheid and Lillian...were doing..."

From beneath her hood, Diko looked at Kumi-Kumi's back. She was making an eye signal, or something like it, to Ranyi. Everyone here understood. It wasn't like they really had to fight right now.

"Right now...Lightning...and Lillian and Adelheid...are fighting. Shouldn't you be going there...? Mephis and I...will... Classroom...heard explosion..."

They probably did want to keep an eye on Mephis and Kumi-Kumi. But they had to be more worried about Lightning, who had dramatically activated her magic in the hallway and then had gotten separated from them, and Adelheid and Lillian, who were probably with her. They didn't have the time for hesitation. Diko and Ranyi ran off without any signal, leaping through the window that they had come out of moments ago, which had been destroyed by Lightning's magic, into the exposed hallway.

Watching the two go, Mephis clicked her tongue. “Why’d you have to get in my way? That was a great opportunity to take Diko down.”

“It’s not...the time...for that. We don’t know...what’s happening now.”

“I should be telling *you* this isn’t the time—for the big package on your back. Why the hell are you carrying that?”

Kumi-Kumi wasn’t so quick on her feet that she could make a snap judgment and retrieve the dragon. She’d explained as much to Diko and Ranyi earlier. She was very much lacking in the speed to come up with the logic on the spot and carry it out. Kumi-Kumi knew that herself better than anyone.

But it wasn’t like she couldn’t do it if she had some time to think. Since Frederica had begun acting strangely and Kumi-Kumi had seen her much less often, she’d started wondering—Frederica saw her as useless, didn’t she? And she’d cut her off. That was pretty sad, but it was also difficult to deny. It was a fact that Kumi-Kumi had been thinking that she didn’t want to do anything awful or bad to her classmates, if possible. It was quite true that Kumi-Kumi didn’t have the talent that Frederica sought.

So then, she thought defiantly. If Frederica was going to do something, and if Kumi-Kumi wasn’t going to be involved, then what should she do? She didn’t want to just sit there and let things happen to her. Maybe the old Kumi-Kumi would have gotten disappointed, disheartened, and given up, but things were different now. Abandoning things just because they weren’t going as she wanted would be inexcusable to Kana. She’d been willing to throw away her life to save Kumi-Kumi. Because Kana had felt her to be worth going that far to save, Kumi-Kumi had to be a magical girl of just that much worth.

It was rather pathetic that the first thing she had done to that end was make it so she could carry around the dragon, but well, she’d say that was very Kumi-Kumi, too.

“And hey, how can you let Diko and Ranyi go?” said Mephis. “If Adelheid and Lillian are fighting Lightning, if those two go, then it’ll be three on two.”

“If they can’t win like that...they’ll run... If they’re allies with the thieves...then the thieves...might save them. If anything...the ones we should worry about...are Lightning’s group.”

“Huh? Whose side are you on?”

"Right now...we should side with the school... We haven't... been contacted at all... If the thieves...are just thieves...then as members of the Elite Guard...and as students of the class...we have to...eliminate...the thieves."

"Come on...isn't that, like, just interpreting things to suit yourself? I mean, like, that's what it is. Though I don't know why it was just Adelheid and Lillian who got contacted."

"They let us go..."

Before her eyes, Mephis's expression turned harsh. Kumi-Kumi could understand her feelings. Being let go just made Kumi-Kumi think, *Oh, I guess so...* But she couldn't understand why Mephis would be tossed aside. It just seemed like something had happened. And it seemed like it wasn't something Mephis could accept.

But there was no time. She had to get Mephis to accept it.

"Something...must have...happened," said Kumi-Kumi.

"Something? Like what?"

"Weren't you thinking...you don't want to attack the school...? And they saw through that..."

Mephis's expression turned even harsher. But it seemed like Kumi-Kumi wasn't entirely wrong. The proof was that Mephis didn't argue.

Kumi-Kumi realized she wouldn't have the time to think carefully going forward.

Kana had gone to the main school. Considering her personality, she would try to defend the students of the main school. They had confirmed that Adelheid and Lillian were connected with the thieves. She had been concerned that there were only two of them, but there was no need to worry. She needed to focus on what came next. They had numbers in the classroom, so they had prioritized Adelheid and Lillian, but that explosion just now worried her. Even knowing that her classmates would be fine from some minor attack, she didn't know what would happen if the attack was *not* minor.

"They saw through us...? There's no way they would cut us off for some stupid reason like that!" Mephis snapped.

"That would...depend on the person—"

The bell rang. It felt so out of place that Kumi-Kumi suddenly stopped talking and looked around the area. She didn't know what would have to happen for the bell to ring. This hadn't been in what Kumi-Kumi had predicted and noted down.

The bell was followed by a muffled voice. An announcement

was coming from somewhere.

“We are currently under attack. All magical girls in class, after evacuating to the courtyard, please listen to the principal’s instructions.”

A tingling sensation ran from the top of her head to the bottom of her feet. Mephis’s whole body trembled. She gripped her arms and tried in vain to make the shaking stop. Kumi-Kumi opened her mouth, thinking she had to say something, but no words came out. There was no need to speak. She would act according to orders. She would head to the courtyard. She would go there and seek the principal’s instructions.

Mephis and Kumi-Kumi dashed off at the same time.

CHAPTER 9

THE WAYS OF PEOPLE, THE WAYS OF THE BATTLEFIELD

◇ Lapis Lazuline the Third

Lazuline had never met Pythie Frederica in person, but even just knowing her history, she could tell that she was absolutely mad. She had attacked the magical-girl class, making to strike knowing that the First would aim for the opening when her forces were all out on the attack, with no consideration for the trouble she would cause to others—because she was crazy.

Lazuline the First was not mad. She was wily and collected. Even if she seemed as if she was taking Frederica up on her pastime-like invitation, she'd have worked in some kind of cheat—something that made it so that even if she lost the battle, she wouldn't lose the war. Lazuline hadn't been told specifically what she was doing, so she didn't know, but for better or for worse, she did trust that her master would never fail to work in something. It wouldn't even be strange if nothing of what her master had told her were true. Even if she did have to go along with Frederica's pastimes in order to catch her by the tail, the First wasn't about to honestly challenge her in a direct fight.

Directions flew from her headset. The commander on the scene was one of the candidates. Her voice was calm. Lazuline was impressed that she would be appointed immediately after the attack on the magical-girl class.

A blue energy ball was thrown in, and the front entranceway exploded. The thick, tall pillars on either side fell over, the eaves they'd been supporting crumbled down, and the Gothic-style building became a mountain of rubble in seconds.

At the same time, there was an explosion at the rear entrance as well, and the team that went in from the sewers into the kitchen, plus the team that knocked down a wall to attack from the side, started their attacks from either direction at once. There were ten of them, elites selected from Lazuline candidates, potentials, and former Lazuline candidates, with an eye to fighting ability. Lazuline didn't know where the First had placed herself. Lost among blue magical girls, she wouldn't be found so quickly.

Though it was right in the middle of a quiet residential area, in order to get through the invisible spell that was activated at all times, you needed to walk and move your fingers a certain way, so no matter how much noise was made, for everyone aside from the visitors and residents, it would remain quiet, the whole area in a separate space. Nobody would get in the way.

Some girls who were wearing fancy and impractical matching maid uniforms shrieked as they leaped out the front door, holding their heads as they ran off. Even if they were noncombatants, they couldn't be let go. One of the blue magical girls kicked at a maid, but it was blocked. The maid outfit was swept aside, and underneath was the costume of what looked like a card soldier.

It was a Shufflin series. That had to mean that under the pretext of hiring maids, they had borrowed fighting forces from some unwise individual in the Osk Faction. Judging from how that information hadn't even reached Lazuline, they had probably gone through a dummy employment agency or perhaps through multiple other companies.

Her master would not underestimate Frederica. She would use everything she had to try to beat her down. So then Frederica would also do this much, at least. But none of this was beyond what they'd expected.

Covering their blue allies, magical girls with the common feature of tiaras with gems in them came out in front of the Shufflins. There were greater numbers invested than the number of Lazuline candidates. But it wasn't as if they were of low quality. Her master had spoken of Princess Lightning as if she were the definitive edition of the Princess Series, but many Princesses had been created before her. Even normal people with no aptitude for being a magical girl were able to transform.

The Princess's morale was high for three reasons: Old Blue's skill at getting a hold on the human heart, the girls' gratitude for

having been pulled up from low standing, and the fact that they were functionally owned. Since the support of the R&D Department was vital for their tune-ups and supply of energy, if their master lost, they were functionally dead as magical girls. They were fighting with their backs against the water. They stood up against the Shufflins with no fear, not even looking to the sacrifices of their allies as they leaped on the Ace of Spades. Even if there were a lot of Shufflins, there were also a lot of Princesses. Of course—since there was no need to select candidates based on whether they had magical aptitude or not.

Lazuline ran to join the group of blue magical girls. Gate guards, mercenaries who had rushed over, girls from the Caspar Faction, and members of the Elite Guard all mingled together as pillars of fire rose, the ceiling fell, a whirlwind kicked up, and acidic mist was sprayed out—but Lazuline slipped through every obstacle, getting away from the group and aiming to get inside.

If she assassinated Frederica, then it was over. The enemy fighters that Lazuline passed by on the way couldn't touch her—rather, by her touching them, she stole away candies of their memories. She saw through all the physical and magic traps, and did not get caught in them—as was expected for a Lazuline.

She never slowed down as she raced through the hallway—but then she came to a sudden stop. She leaned her weight back and dug into the carpet with her heels as she struck the floor with her hands and leaped up, evading an attack and backing to the rear.

Expelling an easy breath, Lazuline gradually lowered her stance, both hands in front of her. Ahead of her was a four-way intersection, and in the middle stood a single magical girl. She had stopped Lazuline, when thus far, none had even been able to slow her progress.

Her costume of a red newsboy cap with white polka dots, functional-looking glasses, suspenders, and shorts made her look like a boy detective with the wrong hat, but she was a magical girl. Her simple silhouette lacked magical-girl-like decorations such as frills and gems, indicating that she was probably from the older generation. Hers was the generation before the archetypal magical-girl image had been circulated through anime and such.

This generation—or more precisely, those from that generation who still continued as magical girls—were all, without exception, strong.

She showed not one whit of attention to the tumult that was rattling the whole estate, maintaining a composed stance. She crouched down, spread her palms slightly, bringing her left hand in front of her chest and her right hand in front of that. Her expression seemed vacant at a glance, as if she weren't looking at anything in particular—she had to anticipate any attack from any direction.

Both of them came forward, and both of them thrust in and blocked.

Lazuline's point-blank elbow strike was just a feint to kick at her left knee without even looking. The enemy blocked with her shin—Lazuline jabbed right, left, and squatted to evade, putting both hands on the floor to kick up and go into a jump—she did a half-rotation at the ceiling, and then the enemy reached the ceiling at the same time. They struck at each other as they raced along the ceiling, Lazuline kicking the lighting to try to strike the enemy with it—and when the enemy kicked it back, she evaded it with a shake of her head.

Lazuline ran diagonally to the wall, then leaped to the opposite wall. Both magical girls did everything at the same time, striking, blocking, stopping, sweeping. Lazuline did a scissor block, and when the enemy suddenly drew her hand back, Lazuline pressed close and used her left fist like a screen. She tossed off her shoe as she kicked, optimizing the flexibility of her various joints—groin, knee, ankle, toes—to skim her opponent's cheek and swipe the memory candy. But her foe's newsboy cap slid down the girl's cheek and prevented Lazuline's attempt.

The two of them tangled as they fell, but the enemy made use of her costume and props to prevent contact with her skin. Lazuline landed without activating her magic, slamming her back into her opponent to send them flying apart.

The enemy moved like she knew Lazuline's magic. This was beyond guessing based on her actions. The enemy knew it clearly. In other words, that meant she'd been placed here to deal with Lazuline. Sending Lapis Lazuline in solo to make the assassination was a plan that couldn't be called a plan, but still a very difficult strategy to prevent, even if Frederica had read it.

Lazuline exhaled a short breath and took a big step forward. She grabbed the rug with her bare toes, pulling it close to her. The long carpet that covered the hallway lay under the enemy's feet as well. Lazuline figured the enemy would lose her balance or leap or

brace herself or pull back instead—but the enemy threw her off by doing something abnormal: pulling the whole carpet toward her without shifting the axis of her balance at all.

Not only had her read been off, but there was also a spear-hand coming at her. Lazuline lowered on the spot to evade and rolled to the side to avoid a follow-up attack, and with her back on the floor she struck against the enemy's leg, smacking the ground to aim for her groin, but the enemy dodged, and with a dizzying exchange of blocks and blows, the two magical girls struck at each other.

Lazuline narrowed her eyes. It wasn't just the dust. There was something wafting in the air.

The hairs on the back of her head stood up. Her body and mind felt something slightly off, and she immediately removed a candy from her own body. Lazuline's magic could remove feelings and memories, but not only that—it could remove the effects of magic from her as well. That was how she had nullified the magic of Puk Puck, the Sage incarnation.

She wasn't only removing the abnormality of the magic—by throwing the candy at the enemy, she made it an attack as well. She fired a total of six candies, but the enemy dodged the first four, while the final two she caught between the index and middle fingers of her right hand and the index and middle fingers of her left hand.

Lazuline leaped back, and when something soft touched her heel, she stopped. A little mushroom was growing on the floor. The poisonous-looking red-and-white mushroom was a bizarrely impactful presence in such a cleanly swept mansion, but it didn't rattle Lazuline—it sharpened her awareness. The floor and the ceiling were moving. It was mushrooms. Mushrooms were growing all over the place. The color of her candies was a dark pink—manipulation of the nerves. She was trying to cause abnormalities in the body through mushroom spores.

“The Great Adulteress Asmona,” Lazuline muttered.

The enemy muttered, “Ohhh,” with an expression of surprise. “You're a diligent student to know the name of an oldster with only age and no fame.”

“No fame? You jest.”

Her pleasant and intellectual attire, orthodox school martial arts, the image of the name “Great Adulteress,” and the very unpleasant effects of her magic all felt mismatched, so it had taken

Lazuline time to pin her down. She should have known from the newsboy cap with the motif of a poisonous mushroom.

I might have been more nervous than I realized.

Even as they bantered, candies were continuing to leak from Lazuline's body. If she got hit with Asmona's spores, she wouldn't be able to fight properly.

I can't believe it, Lazuline thought in exasperation. This was a tough enemy. Whether she won or lost would be up to luck. And their styles meshed too well. If she hurried this match too much, she would be the one getting hurt.

Not bad, Pythie Frederica. Lazuline was aware that she was starting to have fun. She pulled herself together—she wasn't having this fight for the sake of personal pleasure. How far would Asmona's magic spread? The more she moved, the more the spores spread out around her, and even more mushrooms would grow and spread from there. Depending on how great her maximum range was, even if Lazuline remained safe, it was possible all her allies could be wiped out. She couldn't keep this fight going for much longer.

Lazuline kicked up the candies that were piling up at her feet at Asmona. After swinging up her leg, she swung it again, not wasting any of her strength as she stomped down. The floor dented in like a crater, breaking the walls, growing mushrooms and all, deep cracks running up to the ceiling as the remaining candies danced in the air, hitting the walls and floor to fire wildly like pinballs.

The two magical girls leaped at the same time. Kicking the candies in midair, she used the recoil to change the trajectory of her jumps one after another. Together with the countless candies, the two magical girls intersected in midair.

◇ Pshuke Prains

Even having kept in the corner of her mind that this sort of thing could happen at any time, when things actually did go down, seeing them pull it boldly right in the middle of the day was angering and irritating. There was a big difference between being prepared to have a lethal battle and wanting to have a lethal battle. Pshuke couldn't understand those who liked fighting, and she didn't want to, either.

For that reason, she already knew what her plan was. It was to

run and hide.

When some idiot had set off an explosive in the classroom, since Pshuke's first choice had always been to run, she was able to react faster than anyone. She did an about-face and changed direction; Sally was blocking her path, so she wrapped an arm around her waist and swept her away, leaping from the classroom window into the hallway and then leaping straight outside. With the blast wind buffeting her from behind, she got herself ready, trying to land on top of the roof of the outside walkway. But the roof was weaker than she'd thought; she went right through, breaking, bending, and smashing through corrugated sheet metal roof and pillars before crash-landing in the rubble.

Pshuke groaned. A human would have long been dead by now, but fortunately, she was a magical girl. Thanking her luck that she was alive, she figured she should count on further luck to escape this place. But if she moved right away, she might be attacked by the enemy. She should check around the area.

In her arms, there was nothing wrong with Sally's breathing or heartbeat. Her heart was thumping a little fast, but there'd be something wrong with you if your heart wasn't racing in this situation.

"Hey, Sally. I've got a request."

Sally, who had been glaring at her magical phone, lifted her face. Being lit from below in the dark, even her beautiful face was a little scary. "I tried seeing if we could contact the outside, but it looks like a no-go, yeahhh."

"Well duh, if someone's gonna pull this, then they'll prepare for it. More importantly, I have a request."

"A request, in this situation?"

"I'm asking you *because* we're in such a damn mess right now, damn it. What happened to your crow? Is it alive?"

"It's not gonna disappear just from an explosion like that. It's up above, flying to us right now."

Pshuke responded with a sharp click of her tongue, and in her arms, Sally trembled.

"Huh? What, what's wrong?"

"Something sparkly and attention-grabbing like that circling in the sky above us is basically like telling the enemy its master is here. Drop dead, honestly. Is there anyone dangerous nearby?"

"I can't see anyone."

“Then this is our chance.”

She pushed up the roof and moved the rubble aside. A shaft of sunlight poured into the small space where there had only been the light of the magical phone’s screen before. Pshuke kicked away a pillar and moved the rubble, wincing from the dust as she came outside and tossed Sally up on top of the rubble.

Ignoring Sally’s protests at being treated so roughly, Pshuke checked around the area. She could hear the intense clashing sounds from all around that she figured were from fights. The sound of something being repelled, an explosion, something bursting open—it was like the sounds were sporadically whirling everywhere around them.

But...there aren’t as many as I thought.

Pshuke had anticipated rather darkly that since they were attacking a magical-girl class packed with lots of the elite that were the future of the magical girl world, they would certainly surge in with massive swarms, but it seemed she was wrong. If this was how it was going to be, then there was room to escape.

“Whatever the case, we can’t be here.”

Pshuke followed that with, “Let’s get out of here,” while at the same time, Sally said, “Let’s go back to the class, yeahhh,” and the two of them looked at each other. Sally was looking at her with surprise. Pshuke was looking at Sally with a look that said rather more clearly, “*What’re you talking about, you moron?*”

“Why would you go to the classroom?” Pshuke demanded.

“If anyone else has stayed there, we’ll get more fighters.”

“Even if there is anyone still in the classroom, they’ll either be injured or dead.”

“If they’re dead...well, there’s nothing to be done about that, but if they’re injured, we’ve got to save them, yeahhh.”

“Is it the time to be doing that?”

Quiet footsteps mingled with the sounds of battle to approach them. Pshuke and Sally looked toward the footsteps at the same time, then dashed off.

Pshuke clicked her tongue. Sally was planning to fight back. It was completely opposite from Pshuke’s idea that it was best to run. She shouldn’t go with her. She knew that another petty argument would get them killed. But despite knowing that, she followed Sally.

There wasn’t even a shred of anything admirable about this decision, like this was her keeping the promise they’d made in the

cafeteria before the homunculus incident to help each other, whatever happened. There was only one set of footsteps, so rather than them calling their friends, it was best to silence them while they had the advantage of two-on-one—three-on-one if you included the crow. Whether she was going to part ways from Sally or convince her, it would come after that.

The magical girl who came flying out from the other side of the covered walkway had a mask of Cutie Panda with a long tail like a monkey. Sally sounded irritated, saying, “What an incredible misinterpretation, for an outlaw to use the mask of the gentle strongwoman Cutie Panda,” with a click of her tongue, while Pshuke was significantly more irritated as she spat, “Goddamn nerd.”

The two magical girls split to the right and to the left and ran at the enemy. They had coordinated many times during rec time. They just had to include the crow and attack from three directions. Pshuke drew her water gun and pointed the muzzle at the enemy, and by that time the Panda mask was already so close, she was pushing up the muzzle of the gun with her shoulder.

She’s fast...!

With the enemy this close, her water gun wouldn’t be useful. She backstepped in an attempt to put some distance between them, but the enemy stuck close and wouldn’t back off, staying glued to her and grabbing Pshuke’s shoulders with both hands. Sally cried out. Her crow took a dive. The enemy’s chest swelled unnaturally, and she yelled as if she were spitting out all the air inside.

She couldn’t hear anything. Her consciousness was growing dim. In the corner of her eye, a crow was flying. Pshuke’s knees buckled, and with warm fluid dropping from her ears and eyes, she fell without being able to catch herself.

◇ Kana

There was unease all around. The sky had grown dim, and outside the school was hazy. There was probably a barrier up. If they actually tried touching it or something and confirmed that they could not get out, there would be more than just unease. It would become a panic. Kana tried to message back Yoshioka, but she couldn’t connect. Cutting off connections to the outside via every

sort of method—radio wave, electricity, electromagnetic wave, and sound wave—was habitual practice for this type of barrier. So it was no wonder she couldn't connect. The problem was that even if some students or teachers of Umemizaki noticed, it would just cause further panic.

She could hear sounds coming from the old school building. It was the sound of metal striking metal. There was fighting. Was this what Yoshioka's message referred to when she'd said they were attacking the magical-girl class—to guide them in?

Yoshioka had been the one to free Kana from prison and send her into the magical-girl class. She was affiliated with the Caspar Faction, and she worked herself to the bone to expand the political powers of the faction. If Kana were to slack off, she was bound to be sent right back to prison.

But if she abetted blatantly illegal activity, wouldn't that basically also mean being sent right back to prison? Just as much as she owed Yoshioka, she also had a debt and an obligation toward the magical-girl class.

She weighed the scales in her mind. When she imagined her classmates being harmed, with Mephis at the top of the list, the scales tilted all at once, and she didn't seem like she could go back. She didn't know what sort of great cause they had to attack the magical-girl class, but Yoshioka would just have to mourn her poor luck in having freed an ingrate.

Kana's stance became clear. But that wasn't her biggest problem. Even after deciding on a plan to save her friends, she couldn't move from the spot. The Umemizaki students, Muraoka and Kouno, whom she had met when they were producing their art pieces, had concerned expressions as they said things like, "What happened?" Kuroda looked out the window and said thoughtlessly, "Isn't it a prank or something?" while Sanada showed concern for her, saying, "Are you okay, Kana?"

If Yoshioka's forces came here, these boys and girls would have no way of fighting. There were a lot of magical girls in the old school building. But here, in the new school side, Kana was the only magical girl. Whatever was going to happen, if it was a situation involving magical girls, they would need Kana.

It was incredibly frustrating that she couldn't leave despite knowing her classmates were in danger. But when she thought of all her classmates, it seemed that even if they struggled a little, they

probably wouldn't lose. Similarly, when she tried picturing Yoshioka's face, she couldn't help but think that she would be more than just a little struggle. Kana's expression remained the same as she gritted her teeth, and now Sanada was really worried about her.

Regardless, even if she was going to stay here, then she shouldn't remain in this classroom. If Yoshioka's forces came this way, then Kana would find a spot where she could intercept them as well as stop anyone foolish enough to go to the old school building. It was best to have someone in the classroom as support once the chaos reached a fever pitch, but Kana doubted she could fulfill that role.

First, she would leave the school—but then her thoughts didn't get past that point. Suddenly, her mind became perfectly clear, and information surged into it all at once. Kana pressed her head with her right hand, while with her left hand she grabbed the side railing, supporting herself as she staggered.

What...is this? No. Are these...memories? Whose memories...? My memories?

"Kana! What's wrong, Kana?"

The voice sounded far away. It took her time to realize that the one talking to her was herself. Saliva was dripping from the corner of her mouth without being wiped away. From deep in her throat, she could hear a groan that didn't sound like her own voice. She crushed the railing in her hand. She heard frightened voices, and the hands that were supporting her shoulders came away.

These are my memories. The magical-girl prison...and before that, I was cut down. A blade...and brainwashing.

There was the bang of an explosion and the ground shook under her feet. Shrieks echoed. It felt like the events of some other world that was not here. Her memories of before mixed and melded into her memories of the magical-girl class. She remembered who she was and what she had been doing.

She looked to the window. The magical girl reflected in the mirror was looking at her. It was not Kana. The four dots of the holy seal had appeared on her forehead, emphasizing what she was so much it was offensive.

Frederica stole my memories, and those memories have returned now. In other words, the magic has come undone. Why now? What is Pythie Frederica trying to do? Attacking the magical-girl class... The ruins... That's right. There's an artifact enshrined in the underground

ruins.

She blew out a breath from the depths of her lungs and pulled herself up from where she'd been falling over. That thing that had been the railing she'd crushed, she tossed on the ground. It made a high-pitched clanging sound, resounding in her ears as things still wouldn't come together in her head.

"Kana...?"

Avoiding the warmth of the hand that attempted to get close to her once more, the girl called Kana leaped out the window.



◇ Snow White

Right before the apples were thrown in, Snow White's brain operated at high speed. Miss Ril and Rappy could guard themselves with their magic, as could Arlie, and Dory, being close to Arlie, would use Dory as her shield—she'd seen out of the corner of her eye as Pshuke ran off first thing and swept away Sally with her, and she prayed that Calkoro and Tetty would somehow remain safe.

Snow White hit the wall of her classroom with her shoulder and leaped into the neighboring classroom, which wasn't being used. Buffeted by the blast of wind blowing in, she was sent flying and caught herself on the blackboard. With chalk dust scattering around, now she smashed the window with a kick and leaped outside, racing along the eaves to circle around and aim for the classroom where she'd originally been.

She'd heard the voices of the heart before the apples had been thrown in, but she hadn't managed any more than that. She hadn't had the time to warn everyone, either. The enemies were all fast, and even with her magic and Snow White's reflexes, she could only barely keep up.

Circling around, she leaped in from the broken window and attacked with her whole body and anger in it, slicing.

Snow White's prediction that after the attack, the enemy would come in again was on the mark, but it seemed that they had also read Snow White's movements, and her strike was easily blocked with a one-handed sword.

The interior of the classroom was half-destroyed by the explosion, and the floor was falling.

On their side was Rappy, with her magic wrap fluttering to turn the enemy attack aside; Arlie, who had been kicked by three enemies and was now getting punched; and Miss Ril, who had turned black and was probably holding a fragment of Arlie's armor, as her broken part was squirming in an attempt to return to its original shape.

The enemies were the three who were attacking Arlie, two on Rappy, two on Miss Ril, then one who had struck back against Snow White. There were multiple mysterious objects floating in the air,

metallic spheres shaped like eyeballs and a size smaller than a clenched fist.

It seemed Calkoro and Tetty had fallen down under the floor. She could hear the voices of their hearts from there, so they hadn't passed out. Half of the little eyeballs were headed through a hole in the floor to below. They were trying to follow the two who had fallen.

Snow White confirmed what she should do and what she should have other people do.

She shoved against the enemy with the one-handed sword, pressing their blades together. Snow White was using both hands, and she had her body weight in it, but the enemy was easily blocking her with just her right hand. Her mask swayed. Snow White could hear smothered laughter. The laughter seemed to say, "*So this is the Magical-Girl Hunter I've heard so much about?*"

Snow White wasn't strong enough. But even if she was lacking in strength, it didn't mean she couldn't win.

When the enemy moved to stab her in the side with the sword in her left hand, Snow White responded, blocking with the handle of her weapon as she stepped forward to put them close together. Being inferior in strength, martial arts, and experience, Snow White wouldn't last a second in this position. The enemy knew that, which was why they were forcing her into it.

But she didn't have to last a second—half a second was enough.

The hem of her skirt rose, and her scarf danced in the air. A whirlwind whipped up from underneath Snow White's clothes, slid underneath the mask, and leaped into the mouth of the enemy, which was open in shock.

The enemy's chest and stomach swelled—then she went back to normal, dropped her two swords, and coughed hard.

"Mei can make you explode at any time. The last one Mei blew up, Pukin, died from it. If you don't like it, do as Mei says."

The magical girl in the mask thrust a hand down her throat, but before she could cough up Tepsekemei, her chest and stomach swelled. The swelling went on for longer than before, then deflated, and she held her chest and stomach and writhed.

"Mei is patient, but not."

In order to prevent Pythie Frederica peeping on her with her magic, Snow White had borrowed Tepsekemei. During a previous incident, in order to gain their trust, Frederica had entered a

contract that she could not attack any of the magical girls present at the time or use her magic on them. Of those who had been there, three were currently still alive: Mana, 7753, and Tepsekemei, and if it were Tepsekemei, then Snow White could conceal her under her clothing to make it so she could block herself from Frederica's magic at all times.

Though of course this was a hassle for them, this job was also very dangerous. Snow White had bowed her head to them, preparing to be refused, but Tepsekemei had readily given the okay, and though 7753 had been worried, she had not tried to stop her. Apparently, they wanted something done about Pythie Frederica, too.

Rappy let go of her magic wrap. The wrap, which you'd expect to just flutter to the ground, was blown by a gust of wind to stick to an enemy's weapon and to an enemy's arm, and the piece that made to stick to a face was blocked by a staff, but while the enemy's attention was on that, Rappy did a baseball slide between her legs and wrapped them up. With that, the enemy clumsily fell to the floor.

She had hidden Tepsekemei's existence from her classmates except for Rappy. On returning to the Magical Girl Resources Department, she had told her about the situation, and after that, they had practiced coordinating attacks a bunch of times. Now, they were making use of that.

One of the enemies that had been facing Arlie turned to Rappy instead. But right after that, Arlie purged a part of her armor, and Dory, who'd been sheltering protected inside, leaped out and thrust with her drill. The enemy's back was pierced by the drill, and she screamed.

◇ Ranyi

Right after heading to where Lightning was fighting, there was an announcement. There had never been an intercom announcement in this building before, but they had the equipment for a bell to ring, so broadcasting should be possible, too. When the announcement said to gather in the courtyard and obey the principal's instructions, Ranyi thought, *Is this the time for that?* and made to keep running, but Diko stopped. Ranyi couldn't just keep running alone, so

reluctantly, she stopped as well and called out to Diko.

“Hey, what’re you doing? Let’s get going.”

Diko didn’t react. She was a taciturn person, but she had never ignored Ranyi before. Thinking maybe Diko hadn’t heard her, Ranyi circled in front of her, and seeing her face, she was startled. She wasn’t looking at Ranyi. She seemed mentally absent, looking off in the other direction, muttering something to herself as she raced off in completely the opposite direction of where they’d just been headed.

“Hey, Diko!”

Ranyi reached out, and her hand swiped through air. Diko used her magic to vanish to shake off Ranyi’s attempt to stop her, and before Ranyi could even be startled, she had kicked down the wall of the school building and leaped inside.

A Lazuline candidate would learn about all sorts of magic and their effects, and how to deal with them. Right now, Diko was under the effect of a spell. Someone had taken control of her mind and taken her somewhere. If Ranyi was to pin down a trigger, the school announcement was the most suspicious, but she’d been listening to it, too, and nothing had happened to her. She was holding on to her free will right now.

She asked herself what she should do. She had no idea what was going on. But still, it wasn’t like she should just stand here. She had to choose: either to chase after Diko or go to support Lightning.

Diko had most likely headed to the courtyard. But Ranyi wasn’t certain. So then should she go to Lightning? Ranyi knew basically where she was. She could see light and hear thunder coming from down the way on the first floor.

Ranyi started racing toward Lightning, but then yet again put on the breaks.

“There, there, that’s one, right there.”

“Crush it, crush it now!”

Three magical girls in masks were talking and pointing in her direction. There was no time for hesitation. Ranyi decided to turn around and run, but on the second step, she clumsily plunged into the ground headfirst. There was an arrow piercing her left leg. One of the masks was holding up a crossbow and cheering, “Got her, got her!” In order to survive, Ranyi desperately activated her magic. One place connected to another.

◇ Thunder-General Adelheid

Lillian disappeared. Adelheid had assumed she was hiding for some purpose, looking for her opportunity to strike...but even after creating that opportunity, she didn't come out. It seemed she really was gone. That intercom announcement had said nothing, really, so it couldn't be that she'd obeyed that—Adelheid didn't get it. Her plan to make use of the advantage of two-on-one to quickly crush the enemy immediately fell apart, and she was forced into a one-on-one. Being that she wanted to clean this up right away, there was nothing desirable about this to Adelheid.

A flare of lightning overran the hallway, and the blackened ceiling fell. Adelheid kicked the wreckage of the ceiling at Lightning, releasing the energy that she'd been storing all this time in her leg.

"Blitzkrieg."

Scattering pieces of the floor, she raced forward to slice downward from the front at Lightning as she repelled the fragments of ceiling—when Lightning blocked with her dagger, Adelheid pushed through it, getting a decent wound in her shoulder.

When the force slackened, Adelheid pushed further. Lightning must not have liked that, as she fell backward. With her back on the floor, Lightning threw a scattering of multiple daggers, and Adelheid knocked down a number of them with her military saber, while those that missed stuck pointlessly into the ceiling.

Lightning cried, *"Thunder Break!"*

Four of the daggers stuck in the ceiling made a crackling sound. Adelheid immediately made to back away, but Lightning had her legs tangled up, and Adelheid staggered, then was hit with two lightning strikes.

She absorbed the energy with her magic, avoiding a fatal blow. Lightning followed with a thrust to a sweep, which Adelheid rolled to avoid, jabbing her sword at the enemy from her knees. Lightning held her lightning sword in her right hand while in her left hand, she had large gems in between each of her fingers for a total of four.

"Luxury Mode: Burst."

An incredible glow enveloped Lightning's whole body. The wound in her shoulder healed before their eyes. Holding her saber overhead, Adelheid bit her lip. This was the form she hadn't shown

when they'd fought that night at the school, when they had been going around eliminating homunculi. So this was her hidden move?

Lightning's right hand moved. Adelheid went on guard. Should she make the first move? That would be difficult. She would take the attack and attempt to counter. The problem was whether she would be okay taking that one attack. It was highly likely that she would surpass what Adelheid could take.

Lightning thrust her right hand out in front of her, palm at Adelheid. She took a step back. "Could you wait a moment?"

"...Uh, why? Wait for what?"

It seemed like she was at the advantage right now. She wasn't the type to lose her nerve, either. So then just what did they need to wait for?

"I want to fight with you one-on-one."

"Huh?"

"Working together in the homunculus battle with someone you lost to before...well, I don't really feel like I lost, but someone you lost to, then having another one-on-one battle today and winning—don't you think that's like the manga that Mephis brings us? With me being the protagonist."

Lightning took yet another step back.

Adelheid didn't get the point of bringing up something like that now. But she'd never understood this girl to begin with. It was consistent. Adelheid somehow managed to swallow her sigh and prompted her with a jerk of her jaw.

"So what?"

"I don't want to have any interference."

Lightning's eyes went behind Adelheid's back. Adelheid's attention went there, too. There were footsteps. Not of their classmates. Which meant there was just one answer.

"Hey, it's Adelheid."

"Whoa, she's fighting a real tough one."

One was a magical girl that looked like a lizard standing on its hind legs, just a little over six feet tall. Along with her was a baby-sized magical girl who was seated in the middle of a humanoid power suit that was almost six feet tall. They made the school hallway feel cramped. Both of them were pretty unique as magical girls went, but since they were carefully wearing the masks of anime magical girls, they stood out as even more bizarre. The baby one in particular was wearing two masks—one on its mechanical

body and one on herself. If not for the situation, it would have been a laughable sight.

The two of them were Archfiend Cram School graduates and seniors to Adelheid. That they had masks on had to mean they were with the attackers.

Archfiend Cram School graduates were all, without exception, strong. Even if Lightning used her secret move, with these two fighters now in the mix, they *might* be able to overwhelm her.

But after this analysis of the forces present, Adelheid turned back to her two seniors and bowed her head. "Sorry, guys. Ah'd like to get a one-on-one fight 'ere."

The baby's voice sounded harsh. "Hey, hey, we're on a job. If you're a pro, you've got to act rationally."

The lizard one folded her arms and nodded. "Well, they do worry about that sort of thing at that age. But sorry, we can't be pandering to your obsessions."

No matter how you thought about it, she was clearly in the right. Normally, Adelheid would have been the one insisting as much.

But nevertheless, Adelheid bowed her head. "Ah'm sorry. Just this once, please. She's a classmate, but she's got some serious respect for the Archfiend Cram School."

"Huh, really?"

"And she's even come up with original finishin' moves."

Lightning puffed out her chest, proudly nodding for some reason as she said, "Well, I suppose."

"Ahh, I thought I just heard two people calling out their moves. So that was it?"

"So as a graduate of the Archfiend Cram School, Ah've got to go along with these School-isms...um, Ah mean Ah'd feel like Ah couldn't excuse myself to the Archfiend."

The baby groaned, and the lizard muttered, "What can you do?"

"If you bring up the Archfiend Cram School and the Archfiend, well, that's a bigger priority than work."

"Agh...get it over with quick. We'll head for the courtyard first. There was that announcement, and the fighters are probably gathering there."

Adelheid bowed her head repeatedly, and while the two senior magical girls grumbled, they walked off to the courtyard. They passed by Lightning on the way, and the both of them gave her

rude glares.

“Why respect the Archfiend Cram School? That sort of thing isn’t in fashion these days.”

“Adelheid just seemed like she was having so much fun.”

“Huh, not bad, Adelheid. You’re spreading the word. Oh well, do your best.”

They were already acting like seniors to a younger student. Though it varied depending on the character of the individual, Archfiend Cram School graduates often wound up acting like this toward those with respect for the school.

After waiting for the two magical girls to leave, Adelheid slumped her shoulders, and she set her hands on her knees, somehow barely keeping herself from falling right over. “What the hell? That killed mah sense of tension.”

“Sorry.”

“If yer gonna be the main character, then Ah’m sure it ain’t gonna be a battle manga. It’ll be a comedy.”

“I’m all right with that.” Lightning grabbed her gems once more and held them over her forehead. The light, which had been fading, now grew. “After wasting time like that, now I need to get more.”

“How can ya be complainin’ about wastin’ time to me?”

Adelheid tucked her saber back in its sheath but kept it loose. Putting her left hand on her sheath and her right on the handle, she brought her right foot forward in a sideways stance.

Lightning clapped her hands gleefully. “That stance! I know that. It’s called iaijutsu, isn’t it?”

“If yer goin’ to bring out yer best move, then it’s just manners for me to use mine.”

Despite having said that her tension had been killed, Adelheid was at peak tension. She had not forced a one-on-one with Lightning because she wanted to play out a comedy. Even if she had fought with those two seniors, she didn’t think she would have avoided getting hurt. Right now, Lightning was overflowing with energy, and you could get shocked just from approaching.

Adelheid couldn’t use this hidden move, the technique she had yet to show Lightning, in an open brawl. That was why she had avoided a battle with numbers. One-on-one was the way to go.

After thinking that far, a self-deprecating smile came to her face. At the end of the day, perhaps the biggest factor was Lightning’s influence, putting up a fuss like a child, saying she

wanted to fight one-on-one.

“What are you smiling about?” asked Lightning.

“It’s a secret.”

Lightning stood facing Adelheid straight-on, her lightning sword pointed between Adelheid’s eyes. Adelheid would need to take ten broad steps to reach Lightning; she was too far away for a direct attack. But Lightning had something else in mind.

“Damn it...ya gone and done it.”

“Whatever do you mean?”

“While we been talkin’, you’ve been gradually movin’ away. You were gettin’ some distance ta put yerself at the advantage. Nice job, while playin’ dumb the whole time.”

“Battlefield positioning is the basics.”

“Yeah, yeah. Yer right.”

Lightning smiled. The tip of her blade gradually lowered to point at Adelheid.

“*Thor’s Hammer.*”

A purple flash of lightning shot out. The thick energy became a torrent that overran the floor, windows, hallway, and ceiling without even half the time to blink, and at the same time as she fired it, Adelheid swallowed.

She absorbed the energy, but her limits came at the same moment as contact. Adelheid tried to emit from her feet at the same time, but it was an abnormal amount of energy. A moan leaked out of her. Her whole body was burning. Her costume blazed up, and even the individual hairs on her head got hot.

Adelheid stepped forward with her right foot. She couldn’t use everything. But it didn’t need to be everything. If she did just what she could do now, that was enough. Lightning drew back her right foot. She was measuring the distance of Adelheid’s iai.

Adelheid spoke to her in her mind.

Relax. Ya’ve figured it out. There’s no way my iai can reach from this far.

“*Wilhelm Geschütz.*”

She stored all the energy in her saber and released it. Her sheath was unable to withstand the force and warped, while her saber was fired out like a rocket to slam its pommel into Lightning’s gut. Adelheid could even hear bones breaking and flesh being crushed from where she stood. Lightning spat blood, collapsed to her knees, and fell to her side.

The technique was almost like a gag: treating her sheath as a cannon and using the energy she'd gained from the enemy's attack to make her saber fly. By the nature of the attack, Adelheid would lose her weapon, and if it were avoided or blocked, it would be over for her. But when an enemy saw that stance and imagined she was going to do iai, they would be taken by surprise, and firing her greatest secret attack created a particularly big opening afterward for a carefully aimed strike at her chest, which took her down.

Lightning let out a big breath. There was black smoke in it. Kneeling, leaning her elbows on her knees, she somehow withstood it. It was strange that she was even alive.

She coughed a few times. Not Adelheid—the fallen Lightning was coughing. She was slowly trying to lever herself up, but it didn't look like it was going well.

"Don't be reckless. This fight's over," said Adelheid.

"Yes...I lost."

Lightning coughed loudly. She must have given up on getting off the ground, as she threw herself down on her back, limbs splayed out. The saber and Lightning's dagger clanked on the ground.

"I couldn't be...something...special."

"That's can't be done so easy."

"I wanted to... It's frustrating...but perhaps...I feel rather...relieved." She coughed, spitting out the blood in her mouth, then continued. "I don't really remember...why I wanted to be...special...but I'm sure...some memory..."

"Stop talkin'. Ya got broken bones stabbin' ya. Just lay right there and wait fer help."

"I have...no attachments...to my memories...no...I thought I didn't, but..."

"I told ya not ta talk."

"But after all...I don't want to die without ever knowing what I forgot." Lightning pulled out something, but her grip was too weak. It fell out of her grasp and hit the hallway, rolling to clink into the wall. It was a blue sphere—it looked like candy. "Adelheid...take that."

"Ya really are a hassle."

Abused body crying out and resting in between movements, Adelheid moved forward, picked it up, and brought it to Lightning. She didn't think it might be a trap. She had consistently found

Lightning to be incomprehensible, but there was a part of her that she did understand by just a paper's width.

"Put it in my mouth...", said Lightning.

"You do it. Ya've actually got a little more in ya, don'cha?"

Lifting her up, Adelheid put the blue candy into her mouth. She didn't even really understand herself anymore—why was she doing all this for the other girl?

Lightning muttered "Ahhh," followed by "I see..." as she crunched on the candy. "Now I remember."

"What?"

Suddenly, Adelheid noticed—she could hear footsteps coming from the direction opposite the courtyard. There were a lot of them.

Who is it? Haven't heard those footsteps before...

No—wait.

Taking a firm step on her swaying legs, Adelheid stood up. These were familiar footsteps.

CHAPTER 10

PYTHIE FEDERICA

◇ Princess Deluge

The door wasn't locked. There weren't any traps, either. The knob would probably turn smoothly, and she'd be able to open it quietly.

She wasn't surprised. Based on what she'd heard of Frederica thus far, she wouldn't lock it. She was the type to anticipate either Bluebell or the magical girl who had been fighting with her—whoever would be the victor—to open the door.

The door was twice her height—Deluge smacked it to open it and went into the room. At the same time, she shot an arrow of ice into its depths, but the magical girl leaped with a spin and jumped, avoiding all the shots, then landed on the sofa without stirring up any dust, and sat.

The sounds heard from outside the room grew distant. The door quietly shut.

The Western-style room seemed a little too large even for the bedroom of an aristocrat—a whole twenty-seven-yard pool would fit into it. And sitting on the sofa at the back of the room, the magical girl raised one eyebrow like she was quite surprised. With her star decorations, her fortune-teller costume, and her mocking attitude, she was Pythie Frederica.

Frederica folded her fingers and leaned forward with deep interest.

“Now this is a surprising guest. Princess Deluge—I never imagined you would show up. I thought for sure it would be Asmona or Lazuline the Third.”

Letting her talk, Deluge swiftly ran her gaze around the area. The room mixed magical-girl elements with the image of an important person's office: There was a chandelier with decorations

of dancing magical girls, a sideboard, trophies above, girlish paintings, expensive-looking Western liquor and glasses, a bookshelf that was so large it seemed deliberate, a shag rug, a sofa, and a long desk.

There were a bunch of talismans lying on the floor, and in the middle of them was a large empty cloth bag and chains. They seemed meaningful.

But Frederica didn't have any tools at hand that seemed like they could be used as weapons. Was she so eerily calm because she had some kind of plan, or was she ready to die, or did she feel like Deluge wasn't enough of a threat? Her movements earlier had not been those of someone who did not know battle. She was fast and strong. Deluge made her heart settle. She reminded herself to breathe deep and long.

Frederica folded her arms the other way. With that single, artless gesture, Deluge's heart was pounding.

"Just how did you get in here? If you defeated Asmona, then Lazuline should be here, too. If not, then mushroom spores would be flying all around... Oh, I see. You were the water-user. Even if the fungi have strong and tenacious vitality, ultra-low temperatures will freeze them all and keep them from doing their work, hmm?"

This went back to when Deluge had received the message from Bluebell.

While Deluge had looked into the possibility that this was a trap, she had cautiously proceeded with communication. On receiving the proposal for cooperation, Deluge had considered what she should do. But thinking about it now, that time spent considering had been a waste. She was going to accept anyway, so then it would have been better to use that time thinking of something else.

Even if Snow White had been against it, Deluge figured that she would surely have pushed it through, and if Snow White hadn't opposed it, then she would have carried it out like it was the obvious thing to do. Although Snow White hadn't opposed it, she'd been worried—largely because it was difficult for her to see the other's intentions.

Lazuline the Third—the name made her sound like some long-established shop—was not a magical girl Deluge knew very well. But she had no choice but to believe that even just a little bit of Bluebell Candy remained inside her. Bluebell, Deluge could easily

imagine coming to her in tears, clinging to her.

Snow White had been skeptical about how the Third had contacted her of her own accord without Lazuline the First knowing, but Deluge figured that Lazuline the First—Miss Tanaka, who had made Nami into the magical girl Princess Deluge—had probably manipulated her into it. She could easily imagine as much.

Deluge had listened to Bluebell's request for help. And then today, Deluge had received an emergency message, gotten ready in a rush, and then attacked the Caspar Faction headquarters. Deluge, who was blue with a gem-filled tiara on her head, had not seemed out of place among Bluebell's allies, and so she had remained some distance behind Bluebell, who had taken the lead while acting like Deluge was one of them.

As for the whole story up to the point of reaching this room, it was just about all as Frederica imagined. When the mushroom magical girl had appeared and Bluebell had begun fighting, Deluge had figured it would be difficult to get through. Their fight was totally equal. Deluge firing some projectiles would surely have received a fearsome counterattack, but it might also trigger the crumbling of the balance between them.

But now wasn't the time for that. Deluge steeled herself. Just according to their discussion beforehand—that Frederica was top priority, and even if she was in trouble, she didn't need help—she prepared herself and raced through. She felt death in every step, and feeling the endless vibrations from the floor, she put a hand to her chest and squeezed it tight.

She was lucky that four-way intersection had been half-destroyed from their attacks, making enough room to race through, and that their battle had spread out in three dimensions above them as well. Bluebell had probably been showing her some consideration. Deluge was impressed and thankful that she'd done so well when they had a fearsome enemy show up all of a sudden. Hoping to be even a bit useful, Deluge plunged the temperature of the area, freezing the spots she passed through. They wouldn't melt for the time being, and new mushrooms would not grow there. She had been told that she didn't need help, but since Deluge had to get rid of the spores or she couldn't get through, it was fair to call this a necessary expense.

"Oh, this was unexpected. You've got me. Wonderful." Frederica clapped her hands. She sat back on the sofa and praised

Deluge like she was in a position to do so, casually applauding her.

Suddenly, Deluge thought of Dark Cutie. What would she think of Frederica? Would she call her a villain? Or would she disregard her as not a villain but just a scoundrel?

And how would she see Deluge now? Would she still call her a protagonist? Deluge didn't see Frederica as a loathed bitter enemy. She knew she was a bad magical girl, but she was really just trying to defeat her for the sake of her goal. Did that make her a protagonist?

Her heart raced. The air was tense. She had experienced this sensation many times since the fight in the underground laboratory. People here would die. And today might just be Deluge's turn.

If I'm a protagonist...then I won't be afraid. I won't be careless.

"I must give you my thanks for having surprised me. Well then," said Frederica.

In the middle of her talking, Deluge manifested three ice arrows in midair and shot them at Frederica. She had thought she'd picked the perfect moment, right when the enemy wouldn't expect it, but all she sent flying was the sofa. Frederica leaped into the air a hair before they hit—and then the two magical girls who'd been hidden behind the sofa stood up and repelled the ice arrows. Deluge stuck up her trident and blocked an attack from the enemy who came flying at her from beside the sideboard, clenching her teeth as she retreated a few yards and placed her back against the wall.

"And it would be rude to welcome you with empty hands, so I've prepared myself."

A protagonist would not let her guard down. And a villain would be prepared.

Three magical girls who looked like triplets came at Deluge with their fists raised. Their matching cotton tunics were too plain to call magical-girl costumes. They were expressionless—not the faces of those about to fight. They were entirely eerie and without individuality.

"They are bases for Sage incarnations. Unfortunately, it's just hastily made artificial personalities inside them, but well, they can fight. Their combat ability...is sadly quite inferior to that of the bases of the Osk and Puk Factions, but they are still incomparable to ordinary magical girls."

Deluge shot her ice arrows as she thrust out her trident with her right hand while with her left she reached into the bag hidden by

her chest and pulled out what was inside. Brenda and Catherine surged out to leap at the enemy.

◇ Halna Midi Meren

In the end, five reached the courtyard to become her defensive force: Mephis Pheles, Kumi-Kumi, Diko Narakunoin, Tetty Goodgripp, and Classical Lillian. Over a long period of time, Halna had taken each of them by surprise and knocked them out. She'd started with Tetty, then secured Kumi-Kumi during the homunculus incident, which had occurred to eliminate the influence of the Lab. After that, she'd gone and captured one whenever she had the chance. It had been easy for her, since she had absolute power so long as she was in the courtyard.

There was no reason for this particular selection. She'd gone for whoever had given her the chance. She'd had even more chances to take Calkoro—but Calkoro was not just a magical girl; she was also a mage. Killing her would be one thing, but replacing a mage's body with a homunculus was nothing other than blasphemy to the First Mage.

She'd dealt with all the magical girls by making use of a technique that had only just been developed at the Lab: She fused their spirits into the homunculus bases that she'd prepared beforehand, remaking the composition of their bodies. The memories and ego of those handled this way would be swapped into the new body. The technicians at the Lab had been offered a mildly enticing proposal to hand over the technology that could be called their lifeline, leading to them having served their purpose and losing their lives. Even at the Lab, only a limited few knew about this latest homunculus technology.

The magical girls hadn't noticed that their bodies had changed and had continued to live their lives as before. But the homunculi were made to follow Halna's orders. Even if it was over the school intercom like just now, so long as they heard Halna's voice, it would have immediate effect.

Although, making them her private army like this was not her main goal.

Her original goal was to search the underground ruins. The ruins would alter the bodily composition of those who entered. That

was why it wasn't permitted to stay there for long periods of time and exploration activity was limited, and no one had yet to have reached the deepest parts. But if Halna assembled plenty of specially ordered homunculus bodies with magical-girl powers as well as minimum powers of judgment, then that was something else. If she could bring a relic back from the ruins, that would become the cornerstone of the magical-girl class.

But that would come after they had overcome this crisis.

Halna had anticipated that the girls would run into their attackers on the way, and her numbers would decrease from half to one third, but the enemy must have been fewer than she'd expected, or she was lucky, as she was able to gather five girls in the courtyard. Not bad results, given what could have happened. From within the courtyard, Halna ordered them to fight back against the enemy.

In addition, she also launched the reserve forces that she'd hidden in the courtyard. The defense homunculi had been retrieved by the Lab, but she'd had them leave a few under the pretext that they would be used for mock battles. Going along with the concept of the magical-girl class, what remained was a homunculus designed in the image of Cranberry, Musician of the Forest. Since her combat abilities were an inferior copy of the original, she was useful at times like these. Even if she was inferior to the original, her strength was certified. She was stronger than the old model magical-girl homunculi while looking just like the original.

◇ **Tetty Goodgripp**

First, she clenched her right fist. When it came to grabbing things, Tetty could pride herself on the intense grip strength of her mittens. She squeezed her right hand tightly enough to crush it, but her mitten's incredible defensive power kept it protected.

Tetty swung the fist she had clenched so, so, so, so hard at the magical girl who was attacking her. Her strike was faster than grabbing would be.

"Hey, what's wrong, bad guy? You scared? Look at us when you fight," Mephis said, making remarks whenever it was needed. The magical power in her voice lured in the enemies. Though the enemy should have been cautious of Tetty, Mephis's voice caught their

attention, and in that moment, Tetty fired in her fist, and when the enemy fainted in agony and pitched forward, she grabbed their neck with her left hand and broke it in her grip. She tossed the unmoving enemy away and headed for the next one.

Mephis laughed. “Not bad, Tetty!”

Thanks to the body-strengthening magic cast on her, she was keeping up with the strong and fast enemies. Though they’d acted like bullies when they’d first stepped in to try to break into the courtyard, now they were like victims running every which way, somehow managing to survive Tetty’s attacks.

“Don’t ignore me. Look at me.”

Mephis gathered the enemy’s attention while Tetty swung her fists. When their attacks went to Mephis, Kumi-Kumi, wearing the dragon art piece like armor, covered for her. Even as the enemy numbers increased, Diko appeared and disappeared, disappeared and appeared, confusing them and keeping them from settling on a target.

An apple was tossed in. That was a bomb. After hitting the ground, it immediately exploded. But the arrow-returning spell that had been cast beforehand knocked it back to the other side of the entrance, causing a large explosion outside the courtyard.

Thick black smoke billowed skyward. Tetty laughed like Mephis as she punched the enemy. She should have done this from the start. Making up right away and working together with everyone to boost class morale—that was what the student rep should be like. Worrying about how to apologize would get her nowhere and resolve nothing. She was very thankful to Satou for helping her out.

◇ Kumi-Kumi

When the hatchet came swinging down, the head of the dragon guarded her, and when a hatchet came spinning around from behind, the dragon’s tail smacked it down. Until just a moment ago, the dragon had been nothing more than an art piece with no magic on it, but now it moved with energy as if it were alive, protecting Kumi-Kumi.

The impact of being repelled by the dragon made the hatchet enemy leap back. Right where she landed, atop the flagstones, was the trap Kumi-Kumi had laid. The moment the enemy’s feet touched

it, the magic Kumi-Kumi had cast came undone. The sand cube she'd fitted underneath the flagstone lost its strength and returned to being just soft sand, and when the enemy's feet got tangled up, Kumi-Kumi charged the enemy, biting her arm with the dragon's teeth.

With every move to attack or defend, the dragon lost parts. The crystallization of Kumi-Kumi's effort, which she had brought out from the classroom thinking she absolutely didn't want to lose this, was gradually being damaged. But she couldn't let that bother her now. It was more important to beat down the enemies that had come to the courtyard. This wasn't just an obligation. She was having so much fun.

Before, Kumi-Kumi would never have been able to take action so quickly. She certainly would have been pointlessly worrying about unnecessary things, like whether her classmates were safe, what Adelheid and Lillian were doing, or why no contact had come to them.

She could fight while free from obstructive thoughts, and that was so wonderful. For someone like Kumi-Kumi, who was bad at thinking, there could be no happier thing.

◇ **Classical Lillian**

Lillian had loved stories ever since she was young. She was fond of stories of unique protagonists whose quirks would lead them into great exploits. She didn't remember how old she'd been when she'd first realized that she would never take the lead herself. She'd already given up on it as far back as she could remember, and maybe further.

It wasn't as if she had given up on life. A protagonist would always shoulder a heavy responsibility. With Lillian's personality, she was sure to be crushed by that responsibility. So then rather than being a protagonist, she should take on a supporting role. Even if she couldn't score the point herself, if she could lead to a score through a good assist, it would be no overstatement to call her a part of the protagonist.

There had been some changes since she'd become able to transform into a magical girl, but her fundamental nature had not changed. Even now that she was a magical girl, she couldn't bring

herself to want to become a protagonist. There were so many unique magical girls in the Elite Guard. And the magical-girl class was packed with even more uniqueness. They were the ones who would become protagonists. Lillian didn't have even a shred of courage when she wasn't transformed, but she could manage a couple of shreds so long as she was transformed.

When she was human, she ranked even lower, and she couldn't even bother to care about herself. She didn't really take care of her hair, but she didn't get it cut, either, leaving it as is. Even if she had put effort into herself as a human, it could only go so far. Dressing herself up wouldn't make her like Lightning. She couldn't manage a supporting role in her human form. But as a magical girl, things were different. A magical girl had possibilities.

If there was a fight, she could back them up and encourage those who were down, and if something happened, she could support them. With all this overflowing uniqueness around her, she was very grateful that she could do her job, even if she wasn't all that great herself.

That still had not changed. For Kumi-Kumi, who was swinging the dragon around, Lillian used some rope she'd woven to reinforce the construction so that it wouldn't come apart, and by using the yarn she'd set on the ground, she gave Tetty and Mephis, who were fighting on the front lines, opportunities to attack. Throwing Lillian-woven knives, wielding a Lillian-woven whip, and raising a Lillian-woven shield, Classical Lillian was fighting with even more spirit than normal.

Looking down on this from above and seeing how she was fighting, Lillian was satisfied, and she smiled. Her life choices as Classical Lillian weren't wrong, after all. Just because she wasn't a protagonist didn't mean she couldn't make great contributions. Helping the protagonist while not taking on the heavy responsibility of that role was a valid way to live.

◇ Mephis Pheles

Mephis slammed a low kick at the magical girl like a standing lizard, aiming for her ankle. But having kicked, Mephis staggered from the recoil, and when the lizard bared her fangs and came to attack, Diko vanished for a moment to go into a dropkick, timing it

just right to slip through the lizard's defense and get a clean hit on her head, flinging the lizard's head way back.

Diko gave Mephis a smile that only went to her lips. Normally, Mephis might have been angry, but now she smiled back calmly. She meant to say with her smile, "*Your personality hasn't changed at all.*"

"Lizard! Don't you ignore me!"

Mephis was not handling any tough enemies. She left them to those who were originally dealing with them. Mephis used her words to draw the enemies' attention while Tetty took advantage of that to approach them from behind, grab an arm, and break it off. Her magic mittens didn't care if you had thick scales or tough skin.

The lizard cried out, and when she opened her mouth wide, Mephis came from the left and Diko came from the right at the same time to fire in knee strikes, scattering a few teeth—when the lizard still tried to reach out an arm, Kumi-Kumi's dragon wrapped around her, strangling her neck. Ten seconds later, the lizard fell with a thud.

They turned back to the entrance, looking for the next one, but there were no more enemies. It seemed there were fewer than they'd thought, and their morale must have been quite low. Either they had all gone down, or they had judged that running was better than everyone going down and had fled—one of the two.

Mephis bumped arms with Diko and smirked, receiving a smile in return. Next, she high-fived Kumi-Kumi. Then she bumped fists with Lillian, and finally, she shook hands with Tetty.

They'd fought well, her included. They'd all managed to fight as one. Even Group Two as a team had never clicked this well. The magic support from the principal had also been wonderful, healing their wounds, repulsing projectile weapons, and greatly bumping up their physical abilities. They'd really been made to realize how great mages' magic was.

Remembering the principal, suddenly, Mephis snapped out of it.

What had happened with Adelheid? Why had she gotten contacted when Mephis, who was in charge, hadn't gotten any message? Kana had gone to Umemizaki alone—was she okay? What were their other classmates doing, and where? Ranyi and Diko had run off to where Adelheid was fighting, but shouldn't they have stopped them or something? Hadn't it been the feeling of alienation at having been excluded that had moved Mephis into action?

Wasn't there a chance that the issue of Adelheid had been a misunderstanding or an error in communication, and they could have resolved it with a little talking? Weren't the intruders lying in the courtyard who they'd just punched down actually Mephis's allies? Hadn't she obstructed the people she was supposed to have been supporting? And plus—

“Don't let your guard down. More are coming.”

The sound of the principal's voice drew her back to reality. Oh yeah—there were still things she had to do. Mephis faced the magical girls who poured in through the door.

◇ **Snow White**

The only one in the empty classroom under the broken floor was Calkoro. She was moaning, with lacerations and burns on her legs that made her struggle to even walk.

Calkoro had said that Tetty had also fallen through the floor with her. She'd been defending her from the eyeballs that attacked from above, but then as soon as she'd heard the school intercom, Tetty had ignored the eyeballs and raced out of the classroom, leaving her behind about to die, Calkoro said with added complaints.

Snow White and the others had also heard the intercom message. It had told them to gather in the courtyard.

“This was the principal? Was there a broadcast room in this school?” asked Snow White.

“Ummm...I don't know. This building shouldn't have a broadcast room... Maybe she gave the announcement from the Umemizaki main building?”

“But that's not the kind of announcement that you'd let students in the main building hear,” said Rappy. “Kana went that way, but if it were for her as an individual, wouldn't it have said that?”

“Maybe there's some facility hidden around somewhere?” Snow White suggested.

“No, there's no place you could hide...,” Calkoro said, “except—yes. Even I couldn't get into the courtyard. I believe it's that, or the principal's office.”

“Then I'd guess that it's the courtyard,” said Snow White. “Even if the principal announced that from her office, if she ran into the

enemy on the way to the courtyard to give directions...she'd be in trouble. I think it would be natural for her to contact everyone from the courtyard and gather them there."

"Mei doesn't understand why you're bothered about the announcement."

"Why so bothered?"

"Bother-bother?"

"Well, I mean, if the other students obeyed the announcement, then that'll mean that they went to the courtyard," Rappy said, but then immediately followed that with, "But the enemy heard it, too. If they go to the courtyard, then enemies'll gather there, and won't it be dangerous?" she finished, shooting down her own opinion.

Calkoro shook her head. "But...let's head for the courtyard, after all. Everyone else might also be headed that way. At the very least, it seems like Tetty has gone there. Plus, this is the principal, so I don't think she would tell us to gather in the courtyard without any sort of preparation. There may be a shelter or something we can use with that sort of purpose," she said, with an expression like she was clinging to a faint hope.

Miss Ril nodded, and Rappy, who'd been binding Calkoro's legs with her magic wrap, kicked the leg she'd just treated and said, "Then we've gotta go." Calkoro let out a little yelp, groaning with tears in her eyes.

Was the announcement as attractive as Calkoro claimed? Snow White couldn't quite bring herself to agree. There was also something strange about how Tetty had left behind the wounded Calkoro to obey the announcement and leave. It wasn't as if Snow White had known Tetty Goodgripp for all that long, but she didn't think she would do such a thing.

"Wait," Tepsekemei murmured briefly, and Snow White looked at her. Tepsekemei had her usual cool look on her face as she pointed down the hallway. "Lots are coming."

The enemy, who they'd beaten into unconsciousness, were tied up and abandoned in a corner of the classroom, with their arms and legs broken off. If more had come to save them, the odds were high that they'd come in even greater numbers. The magical girls spread out, raising their weapons in the direction of the classroom entrance.

Snow White's grip on her weapon tightened. This was strange. The voices of the heart she could hear were off.

“Everyone, watch out. Something is...this is—”

Snow White tried to warn everyone, but she didn’t know what she should say. Something incomprehensible, something that shouldn’t be possible was happening.

A magical girl opened the door artlessly to appear—she was not wearing a mask. She was someone Snow White knew, smiling at them.

“So you were safe! What about everyone—?”

Calkoro wasn’t able to finish her sentence. From behind the smiling magical girl appeared a new figure, and from behind her, yet another, one after another.

◇ **Pythie Frederica**

She was playing it cool, but on the inside, she was enjoying the thrills. Yes, you must never forget to enjoy yourself. There was no pleasure to be had if all you felt was panic, and you would simply lose.

Princess Deluge was an unexpected, rare visitor, but Frederica did not panic. The unpredictable would always happen anyway. Lazuline the First was a nasty, nasty opponent, and she was betting her own survival on this, so it was only natural that Frederica’s predictions would be off.

But having your predictions be off and being unable to deal with that were completely different things. Frederica didn’t believe that she could fight with Lazuline the First without two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine layers of preparation.

Base number one clasped a blade in only her left hand, while she made to swing a punch with her free hand—her opponent tried to block that with her helmet but was flung dramatically backward. Of course. Even if they were hastily manufactured, they were far stronger physically than the average magical girl. But even as Brenda was being struck, she spun around and set her foot on the opposite wall. Base number one was already right in front of her and swinging a fist, striking Brenda again. But right before the fist connected, Brenda generated a blade in front of her face, and it dug deep into the base’s fist. Blood flowed out from under Brenda’s warped helmet, dirtying her face and reddening her eyes, but there was a strong light in them. She was different from before, when

she'd been fighting in the ruins that Puk Puck had occupied. Back then, even leaving aside how she'd been being mind-controlled, she'd been fighting like she was swept away. Now, you could see her will. She had grown as a magical girl.

As for base number two, since her opponent had projectile weapons, she was more aggressive about getting closer and punching at her. Catherine was stuck constantly using her cannon as a shield and was unable to go on the offensive—she kept getting hit, getting flung right and then left. Frederica had also witnessed the bombardment at the ruins—that had been too powerful. It was one thing if she didn't care if she blew herself up, so long as she could kill Frederica. But from the way she was fighting, it didn't look like she was going for a kamikaze run. Another punch sent her flying and slammed her into the door.

“Luxury Mode: Burst.”

Deluge went to help her. While drawing base number three along with her, she sliced at base number two, swinging around her trident, then suddenly crouched down. Her crouching down opened up a firing line between base number three and Catherine, and the cannon fired. No—not the cannon. There was a continuous fire of smaller bullets like a machine gun, hitting base number three right in the face. She lifted both her arms to guard her face, but she spurted blood, and now she was the one getting slammed into the edge of the room. Brenda slid in, balling up her small body even smaller to pass under the bullets. Base number one, which had been chasing after her, couldn't get through the same way and so stopped, and the trident thrust in to get her hard from behind.

Brenda swung her blades as if she was dancing. She moved in tandem with Deluge to keep the enemy from fixing their aim on her, abandoning defense to focus on attack, and the more blades she swung, the faster they became. Her blood flowed and her armor warped, but she still took no heed to the damage she took. The hair of the base was sliced off, her blood gushed out, her fingers flew off, and her knee was broken.

Catherine sprayed bullets as she moved, jumping off the wall as she leaped around, and all the while, she never let up off the trigger. It appeared as if she were firing randomly and with no discrimination, but she never hit an ally. The bases alone were forced into defense and evasion.

Frederica's eyes slid around the circumference of the room as a

sigh slipped from her. She had thought that artificial magical girls, be they Shufflins, the Princess Series, or the ABCD Series, were not to her taste, that they were not magical girls in the correct sense, but perhaps that had been prejudice on her part. Their relaxed limbs, the way they worked together like a single body, and the way that they continued to spin around without ever stopping was so beautiful. Ashamed at how shallow her view had been, Frederica leaped up to the ceiling.

She felt the three pairs of eyes of her opponents painfully well. As they fought, they had always been aiming for Frederica in the corner of the room. The three bases, ordered to defend Frederica, were forced into a handicapped battle to keep her safe. Due to their inferior intellect and faint sentience as a low-class homunculi, they had failed to exhibit their strong physicality to the utmost and were being pushed back.

Seeing this, Frederica revised her orders. “You need only cover for me minimally!”

At the same time, she went for a flying kick—right before she would have intersected with the trident that Deluge thrust out, she twisted around, swishing aside the spear points with the hem of her skirt to land, grabbing the carpet hairs in both hands to sweep Deluge’s feet out from under her.

“Did you think I would only watch from behind?”

Frederica withdrew her legs, ripping away the carpet she gripped to throw it up in front of Deluge’s eyes.

The attack wasn’t meant to cause damage. This was to block her vision and make her lose composure. When an arrow of ice flew at Frederica from behind, she struck it away with a back kick, then did a half-turn, skirt fluttering, and smacked the second arrow. She then grabbed a trophy from the sideboard and threw it at Deluge with the accuracy of a first-class baseball player.

Deluge took a half step back to evade, but the movement was too large. That combined with the carpet blind left her unable to evade the punch from base number one, which approached her from the right side, and though Deluge raised her trident to block, she was flung up to the ceiling. With a half-turn in the air, she put a foot on the ceiling, and the chandelier audibly swayed. It was quite impressive that was all a punch from the base did to her—but now Frederica had bought herself some time, if not much. While Deluge was temporarily retreating to the ceiling, the three bases and

Frederica would charge Catherine and Brenda.

Frederica carefully crushed the arrows of ice aiming for the bases with her skirt. The type of arrow that was not controlled by her will, but rather on automatic pilot, was perfect for Deluge to use while wielding her trident, but they moved too simply.

Back in the underground laboratory, Frederica had watched Deluge through Stanczyka, and at the amusement park, she had watched her through Ripple. And under the pretense of investigating the incident, she had thoroughly looked into the way Deluge had fought in the ruins where Puk Puck had been holed up. So she had a lot of information.

On the other hand, how well did Deluge know Frederica? Even if she had heard some things from Snow White or Lazuline, she couldn't assume that was all Frederica had. And this wasn't just about Frederica herself—to begin with, she didn't know even a fraction of anything about this room.

Base numbers one and two went to Brenda, while number three went to Catherine. Brenda, who was now handling two on one, backed up, placing the bookshelf at her back as she generated an additional sword, readying herself with a blade in each hand.

Unfortunately, that's nearly certain death for you.

Brenda's back touched a book, and a device activated. A blade like a butter knife flew out from the bookshelf to thrust into Brenda's undefended back. It pierced her easily, as if Brenda's armor and her tough skin and flesh didn't even exist. She spat blood, and while she struggled, number one and number two, with no care to injuring their own fists, fired in one, two strikes, beating her to a pulp.

Deluge bounded off the ceiling to come down between them, and the two bases backed away. But Brenda was already beyond fighting. Catherine howled with anger and readied her cannon. Number three's fists sank into her side, but even as Catherine spat blood, she remained in a firing stance.

Frederica's brow furrowed slightly. Now that the sisters had been beaten to shreds, they were mad with anger and moving differently. They hadn't done anything that seemed like suicide attacks before, but she couldn't say for sure that the next attack would not be.

Frederica reached a hand out to the wall and pressed a slight swelling under the wallpaper.

The chandelier that decorated the ceiling trembled as if resonating with something, and without a moment's delay, it fell. Catherine and number three, who had been attacking her, both were caught underneath it. To be mad with rage was, in other words, to lose your powers of attention. The chandelier burst with light, and the two magical girls touching it spasmed and stopped moving.

Frederica sighed sadly.

"What a truly regrettable thing to do to that specially made chandelier, decorated with charming magical girls," she said as she did a half-turn, then turned back the other way, skirt fluttering to strike down an arrow of ice. Her skirt was heavier than before. Its power had increased.

"Luxury Mode: Full Burst!"

Deluge was enveloped in a dazzling light. She stabbed number one, which was mindlessly continuing to punch Brenda, right through the back, and kicked her down. Number two reacted to that and tried to twist away, but she couldn't move. Brenda's blood, flowing down onto the carpet, froze, capturing number two's leg. Deluge stuck her in the neck with her trident and was already facing Frederica.

Frederica got glimpses of her expression through the light—it was all rage.

Frederica thought she was beautiful, and she also thought this was a waste. After all her rage at her comrades' deaths and displaying greater power than usual, her wishes would still not come true, and she would fall in vain.

Deluge ran. Frederica was at the back of the room, while Deluge was near the entrance. They were far apart, but that wouldn't be a problem. And right now, Deluge's speed and attacks would outdo Frederica's reflexes.

"But you have no chance. How very sad."

One step to the east from the center of the room, in a spot where there should have been nothing in particular, Deluge's body bounced in the opposite direction she'd been going. Deluge hadn't jumped of her own will. She'd simply made high-speed contact with the invisible presence that had always been there.

She fell backward, broke the long desk, and bounced. When pieces of the desk came flying, Frederica adroitly dodged them. Deluge groaned, her body trembling. After hitting it at that speed,

she wouldn't be able to move properly.

Once, an invisible barrier had been used in the B City region to lock up some magical girls—Frederica included. What Deluge had just crashed into was just such a barrier made into the shape of a board, about the size of one tatami.

Brenda had been cut up in spite of her protective armor and her magical-girl toughness; Catherine was rendered immobile from the hit by the chandelier. Frederica was using magic items. The Caspar Faction was lacking in funds and such items, so when the Puk Faction sold off everything in their storage, the Caspar Faction received those items from the wealthy person who had bought them. They worked so well for such a bargain.

And it hadn't just been the items; there had also been Frederica's reading of the situation. Setting up the traps with thoughts of, *She's sure to touch this place during the fight*, or, *She's sure to stand there*, had been so much fun.

Frederica had figured that Deluge would try to come straight for her, so she'd moved nonchalantly to position the board-shaped barrier on the line between the two of them, then lured her in. That had also been fun. A prank was made for the pleasure of the one setting it up.

The functionality of the barrier was no different from that which had even managed to trap magical girls like Sonia Bean and Archfiend Pam. No matter how powerful Deluge was, she wouldn't break it, and touching it would make her go numb.

Even as she fell, Deluge glared at Frederica. Though all the movement she could manage was trembling, her gaze was murderously piercing, with none of its fighting spirit lost. She was just like a beast. A shiver of pleasure ran down Frederica's spine.

"Wonderful. The way you don't give up until the end is worthy of praise. Though it brings me chagrin, I will offer the finishing blow to bring a beautiful conclusion to that attitude of yours."

She took a step toward Deluge and raised her foot. Stepping on her neck to break it would be nice. Just as depicted by artists of every time and place, a weakling being stepped on was picturesque.

But her foot did not step down. Frederica turned to the door, eyes wide, and she leaped back. While leaping backward, she scooped up Deluge's trident, landing on one foot atop the sofa with springs sticking out as she quietly stood on guard, facing the door. Contrastively with her soundless stance, her heart was pounding

louder than ever.

She was here. The presence that had appeared on the other side of the door was the one she'd felt countless times, in the places where magical girls she had tried to hire had been attacked. The presence of Pukin opened the door.

The problem would be the first strike. Many magical girls had been unable to evade it and had died. But Frederica had evaded Pukin's attacks in the past. She remembered them. The spacing, timing—atop this sofa, she should be just barely out of reach from the entrance to this room. She would lure her into attacking where she couldn't reach and jump back while she activated a trap to catch the attacker.

The door opened. A magical girl with one eye, one arm, and a drawn ninja sword raced into the room.

Ripple...?

The unexpected situation slowed her reaction by just another half a moment. She'd jump backward—"No," she cried in her head. If it were Pukin, the optimal distance would be farther away. But that wasn't true for Ripple.

Ripple leaped straight for Frederica, drawing her ninja sword at the same time. In terms of pure speed of the blade, Pukin was far faster. But closing the distance on a ninja's legs while swinging her sword, it wasn't even about fast or slow—she was just a different beast. Having moved here anticipating a thrust from Pukin, Frederica couldn't manage to evade. Right before the blade reached her neck, Frederica blocked it with the trident. They strained against one another, blades clashing as the two magical girls were brought to a halt. How should she move from here to escape from this predicament?

But faster than Frederica's thoughts could gather, countless shuriken and kunai flew in from the open door behind Ripple.

She'd already thrown them before opening the door?

The shuriken and kunai drew an arc, avoiding Ripple and attacking the frozen Frederica.

One, two, four, eight stuck in her shoulders, her chest, in her back. Kunai and shuriken pierced her throat, stomach, arms, legs.

You really have...done it...

The blood flowed out of her. Her consciousness faded. She could tell that she was nearing her end. She wasn't capable of burning with anger and coming to her feet or crawling away in an

attempt to escape. No more energy remained in her to do so.

She wanted to see Ripple's face, at least, but her vision grew dim until she could no longer see anything. She couldn't hear any voices. There was no sound. In a space where there was nothing else, Frederica made to breathe a sigh, but she couldn't even do that.

◇ Old Blue

After walking over the body of the magical girl who was burnt to a crisp, fallen with a crossbow in her hands, there lay a blue magical girl with the motif of a goldfish, pierced by a total of five arrows. It was Ranyi. Old Blue couldn't see Diko. Was she fighting somewhere else, or was she no longer alive?

Lazuline stepped up to Ranyi and took her hand. It was sticky with blood. Two of the arrows had pierced her vitals, and the amount of bleeding said it was a fatal wound.

She was drifting between life and death, but it seemed she was barely conscious. When Ranyi realized who it was who had taken her hand, she opened her mouth slightly with a smile. Lazuline squeezed her hand back tightly and whispered, "You've done an amazing job... I truly am glad I made you a student."

It seemed like Ranyi tried to say something, but nothing would come out. A single teardrop fell from her eye, and her hand slowly went slack, her body cooled, and she died with a smile on her face. Old Blue stroked Ranyi's now-human face and closed her eyes, then laid her down on the spot.

"Stay there for now. I'll come get you later."

Old Blue's magic allowed her to see the true nature of people and things. She could lead her students in the direction she wanted, though this depended on the talents of the disciple. Unfortunately, she couldn't say that Ranyi had been overflowing with potential. Her physical abilities were pretty decent, but her mental flaws stood out. She was timid, unable to be bold because she worried about what others thought. She wasn't honest with herself; she wanted to look good in front of other people and didn't mind if they didn't actually think highly of her.

If she experienced a moment of great growth, then it would be triggered by the stirring of her emotions. Lazuline had nurtured

Ranyi along the lines of her potential, guiding her so that her magic could grow in the right situations. If she experienced a truly hopeless threat to her life, then her natural cowardice would cause her to explode, and she would use magic far beyond her original capability. Her magic, which normally reached a very short distance, would break through its limits and connect her with the faraway person she most wanted near to her. That was how Old Blue and the others had come here.

The person Ranyi most wanted near her was Old Blue. It was for this purpose that Old Blue had greatly decreased the amount that they would see each other, and once Snow White had transferred in, she had made that a reason to cut off contact, to strengthen her desire to meet her teacher, to ask her advice even further.

She had foreseen that this would happen to Ranyi—that she would lose her life. The exceptional intuition that was seen as a vital condition for being a Lazuline was sharpest in the eldest of them, Lazuline the First, Old Blue. She was using magic for it, so she would never be wrong. She saw how people would die with almost clairvoyant accuracy, and she had put together a strategy without even talking to the Third.

“Okay, everyone spread out now... These grounds aren’t that large, so it’s not as if we’ll be splitting up. We’ll deploy our numbers across the area to suppress the enemy.”

“Are you going to stay here, boss?” a subordinate asked. “That’s boring.”

Old Blue replied with a smile. “I might remain here, and I might not.”

“You mean you won’t know where you’ll be?”

“It’s fine for my place to be indefinite. There’s meaning in what no one knows. When you don’t know who the commander is, then you can’t target them.”

Her subordinates had all been doing as they pleased, and at that remark from her, about half of them nodded. The other half may not even have been listening, but it was fine for them to be like that.

“Well then, everyone spread out. We’ll destroy the enemy, and after suppressing the courtyard, we invade the ruins and steal the relic.”

Appearing from the path that Ranyi had spent her life to

connect, her subordinates ran off. She had prepared enough people to bury this school. No matter how many were consumed, it would never end.

While running along, losing herself among her subordinates, Old Blue prayed for Ranyi's passage to the world of the dead and for Diko's safety.

◇ Thunder-General Adelheid

Adelheid was confused. She could hear footsteps. There were multiple. They were right there. She understood right away whose they were, but she secretly denied it.

"Hey," she said to Lightning.

"...What is it?"

"What're those footsteps?"

"Ahhh." Lightning opened her eyes a crack and closed them again immediately. She was continuing to breathe shallowly like it pained her, body slack. "...Adelheid."

"What?"

"I won't insult you for this. Run—now."

"Huh?"

Without replying, Lightning weakly reached out an arm, and Adelheid took her hand. Underneath her glove, ripped in battle, she could see something. She put her fingers into it and peeled it off all at once.

Branded on the back of Lightning's white hand was a heart mark, and beside it was a little number nine. Adelheid's eyebrows furrowed.

"Some people stronger than me may be coming."

Lightning was branded with a nine of hearts. She could hear footsteps. Adelheid understood something, but she hadn't managed to digest it. She was unable to move, and she just kept staring at Lightning on the ground.

The footsteps were nearing them. There were multiple. They were so close.

"Oh, hello."

When she looked in the direction of the voice, from around the corner, the owner of that voice showed herself. What appeared was Princess Lightning. Adelheid looked back at Princess Lightning for a

while, stunned, and then looked over at the fallen Princess Lightning. And then her eyes turned once more to the new Princess Lightning.

There were more Lightnings. Three of them were lined up in a row, with even more Lightnings packed behind them. In a voice that only Lightning at her feet could hear, Adelheid muttered, "What in the hell?"

EPILOGUE

◇ Mana

Quite a while back, there had been a meeting about an inheritance, so Mana had taken two of her friends to head out to an island. But a great tragedy had occurred there, with multiple people turning up dead. It hadn't felt like a vacation at all. Even after being freed from the island, she'd been busying herself with the investigation, never with a moment to settle down. She was still giving up her holidays to work.

Now that she thought of it, ever since that inheritance meeting, it had been nothing but bad things happening. She'd been told she was certain to be promoted, but that had fallen flat for some reason; she'd slipped and fallen by the gym entrance; the content of the highly recommended A set at the cafeteria had changed for some reason—there were lots of things, big and small.

And that wasn't her lucky day, either. She was being forced to accompany a strange magical girl.

"Look, Uluru doesn't want any more tea, so could you bring me juice next?"

"This isn't a café or a restaurant. Who died and made you queen? Is that who you think you are?"

This was no diner. It was the interrogation room of the Inspection Department. Aside from the questioning of suspects, this room was also used to gain useful information from informants. Since it was fully equipped to prevent spying, this place was thought to be the best place to use for this. It was ironic that a room with nothing but a desk, chairs, memo paper, and writing tools—not even a window—would actually put Mana at ease.

But any member of the Inspection Department would wonder if they should bother using the room for this guest.

"But Uluru is a guest."

“No, you’re not!”

Uluru, a silly-looking magical girl with a coat and a toy gun, occasionally visited the Inspection Department to see Snow White. She appeared to be some kind of assistant to Snow White who passed information to her before promptly going back home. Mana figured that Snow White was like an Edo-period patroller, and Uluru was one of her henchmen. The historical novels that Hana Gekokujou had once brought into the Inspection Department had been mildly popular among the investigation teams for a while, so a lot of the other investigators must have interpreted it that way, too, and Uluru’s presence wasn’t generally considered to be a nuisance.

“Generally” was the operative word in this case. When Uluru came while Snow White wasn’t there, that was excepted from “general.” Uluru was long-winded and not good at talking, but let your guard down, and you’d be caught by her magic. And with her temper and how quick to fight she was, nothing good ever came of talking to her.

It seemed that Uluru also figured that she shouldn’t bring up her important information with anyone aside from Snow White, and so they spent the whole time on a meaningless parlor debate. In the end, Uluru left without Mana ever knowing what she wanted to say.

Uluru had apparently worked closely with Snow White before the latter had infiltrated the magical-girl class, but post-infiltration, they were working separately, and Uluru was supposed to report if something happened.

Her presence made those inspectors who scowled at Snow White’s freedom from authority scowl even harder, and nobody wanted to deal with her. And then at some point they made an unspoken priority ranking for who would deal with her when Snow White was absent. No, maybe it hadn’t been *made*, but it definitely existed.

Mana was top priority. Though she would only say so very reluctantly, Mana was young and an underling, and so unpleasant roles were often foisted on her. Not only that, she had, albeit temporarily, worked together with Uluru during the incident when Puk Puck had occupied the ruins. So it wound up like, “*You’re close with her, right, then you deal with her, please.*”

While she wondered why the heck she had to be the one to deal with her, here she was dealing with her again. Leaving Uluru unattended would be a dangerous thing in its own right, so

someone had to handle her.

“Where are the snacks? You need snacks, right?”

“If you commit a crime, I’ll give you a katsudon.”

“If Uluru ate a katsudon for a snack, Uluru wouldn’t be able to have my dinner. You need to consider things better.”

Mana clenched her teeth. “...By the way, just what is your business today?”

“Is Snow White not here? Uluru has business with Snow White.”

“I just told you she’s not in! ...Sheesh, if this business is something you can tell only her, then just go home. She won’t be back anytime soon.”

“But wouldn’t it be a waste to go home without doing anything? And when will I get my snacks? You can’t not offer a guest any snacks.”

Mana’s teeth made a nasty sound. She wanted to believe they hadn’t cracked yet.

“I’ve really had enough of you...”

Her magical phone vibrated. Mana stood up, turned away from Uluru, and turned her phone on to check the messages. A number of people at Umemizaki Junior High had been attacked. It seemed they were using a barrier.

“Umemizaki Junior High is where Snow White and Arlie go to school!”

Mana panicked and turned around. Uluru had been peeking at Mana’s phone over her shoulder.

“You can’t just snoop on case information—”

“We’ve got to go save her, like before! Follow Uluru!”

Uluru opened the door and burst outside, running down the hallway while Mana rushed after her.

◇ Mariko Fukuroi

“Young people these days really are no good, honestly,” the woman bemoaned as she slammed down her beer stein. She wore a leather overalls motorcycle riding suit stripped off halfway, her shaggy brown hair tied at her waist. The fried sparrow on skewers that she had lined up on the plate in front of her rattled as if in protest.

“Complaining about young people these days? That’s proof you’re old.” A woman clapped her hands and laughed. She was

blatantly a woman of lower class, with a bright pink tracksuit, sandals on bare feet, and hair of a somewhat paler pink than her clothing tied into two pigtails as she brought a cigarette and alcohol alternately to her mouth.

The brown-haired woman lifted the stein she'd just slammed down, audibly swallowing the remaining half before smacking it on the table again. The sparrows rattled even more than before.

Mariko looked around the area. The *izakaya* was about 70 percent full with a decent amount of people. However, the combination of a rider's outfit, a punk in a track suit, and a white lab coat was certainly unusual, and some customers were whispering to each other and giving them glances.

"Come on, stop being so loud."

Ignoring Mariko's warning, the woman with brown hair brought up her theories on modern youth. "Have you heard? These days when young people get together for something, they go for Magical Teatime."

"Huh? That's a café. They don't go to bars?"

"That's right. They don't serve beer there. It's like, why do I have to talk with those morons sober? Poking at your cake or mille-feuille or whatever while drinking chamomile or Darjeeling or whatnot, is that the way a magical girl is supposed to be?"

Mariko figured that was far more magical girl than being alone at a bar grumbling with a beer mug in one hand, but since if she said that, it would just be dissing herself, she said nothing and took a drink. The junmai sake "magical boy" had a gentle feel on the tongue, as usual, and felt comforting. "Aren't they just happy to eat and drink at that shop while transformed?"

"I don't know what's so fun about going to eat and drink while transformed."

"You don't have to worry about the calories."

"Have you ever worried about calories?"

"There's no way. She's got a nice figure, even if she eats."

Pink hair wriggled around at the hips, pushing out her chest in a sexy pose, and when brown hair saw it, she let out a vulgar snicker in a voice raspy from drinking.

"Gonna go freshen up," said Mariko.

"Be quick about it."

"No running away."

Mariko stood up, and while heading to the bathroom, she

looked at her two friends. Printed in Ming typeface on the back of the brown-haired girl's T-shirt was: *"I'm a magical girl, but I'm off duty right now, so I won't transform."* Mariko just about spewed out the soy-simmered sand lance that was still in her mouth but restrained it with her right hand.

It had been a long time since she'd last come to the bar with her friends to drink. They were really loud and bad-mouthed, and with their aggressive fashion sense, they stood out way too much. There were a lot of bad things to say about them, but despite it all, they made her laugh when they drank together, and she made them laugh.

No, that's not quite it.

It was less that their aggressive fashion was bad and more that they were just bad. They didn't try to conform to society, other people, or to the occasion—they just came as they were always, so with all three of their quirks combined, they stood out like sore thumbs.

Finishing her business, Mariko returned to her seat and poured beer into her mug. "But I think I'm not as bad."

"Huh? What're you talking about?"

"I just came in my lab coat by mistake. It's not like I'm doing it deliberately."

"I don't get what you mean."

"I don't know what you're talking about, but isn't doing it by accident a bad thing? I seem to remember someone important saying something like, 'Aging's already started in your twenties.'"

"You seem to remember? Do you remember, or don't you?"

All three of them laughed.

If these guys were getting treated to eat and drink until they were satisfied, they wouldn't even give a damn if Archfiend Pam was the one footing the bill. Mariko was going to be paying quite a lot for this, but well, whatever.

After the girls cheerily were like, "Okay then, what do we do next?" Mariko got a taxi for the two of them and moved the motorcycle to nearby metered parking. Mariko got into the taxi late, and within three hours, they arrived at a deserted beach.

It was originally a remote fishing village with not much in the way of houses, and since it was early morning, there was nobody passing by.

Her two friends, walking ahead of her, must have sobered up a

bit as they sat down on some driftwood, talking to each other about something while they patiently waited. As soon as they sent the taxi back, the pair began talking. They hadn't completely shaken off the alcohol yet. They were loud.

"What the heck, making us wait?"

"What'd you do with my baby?"

"I put your bike in coin parking," said Mariko. "I have the money for that, so you don't need to worry."

Pink hair grinned. "Nice. I don't really get why, but you're generous."

Brown hair nodded with a "Yeah" as if she'd only just noticed. "Oh yeah, oh yeah, now that you mention it, she really is. Well, I guess that means it's worth it for her. She's only ever come to us with fun stuff to do, though."

"Your fun stuff is always a fun time."

The two of them looked at each other and smiled.

"Well, we wouldn't let you bring us anything boring. We rejected Pythie Frederica's invitation to come here, so this is bound to be more fun than what she's got."

"I don't really know what's up, but it was fighting with some students or something like that, right? That doesn't seem very fun. It's like, lately they haven't really been cutting loose, y'know. The resistance wasn't as great as I thought it'd be, either."

"Students are all shit, they're shit. Kids these days really are."

"You're back on that again?"

The two of them laughed, but Mariko didn't laugh. "It won't be a hassle, and it'll definitely be fun. I'm gonna have you two fight me right here."

The laughing stopped. They slowly looked toward Mariko—pink hair suspiciously, and brown hair with irritation, as they asked, "What do you mean?"

"The hell do you wanna do?"

"Like I said, fight. If you don't wanna do it 'cause you're scared, you can run. What'll you do?" she said, aware that the statement was equivalent to a declaration of war. They all transformed: pink hair into a magical girl growing nine thick and fine tails like a fox, brown hair into a yamabushi-style magical girl with a khakkara, and then Mariko into a magical girl with a giant rugosa rose blooming on top of her head.

"Ha-ha! Then let's have some fun!"

“Fucking Marika! You tricked us!”

“If you guys beat me, then I’ll do whatever you want,” said Mariko. “If I beat you guys, then do what I say.”

“What? What are you gonna make us do?”

“Cut ties with Frederica.”

After a moment of blank space between them, Monako spun around her khakkara and placed the butt end of it in the sand. With the sand scattering around them, she cried, “Die, you florist bitch!”

“Come at me, idiots! Ha-ha!”

“Agh, you really are a piece of shit! Damn it!”

The three magical girls all leaped at the same time.

◇ **Kashiki-akarukushi-hime**

Kashiki-akarukushi-hime, the Caspar Faction’s new incarnation, was sitting on a stool in the room in the deepest part of the new headquarters they’d moved to. There was no one else around.

The story going forward would be that the old incarnation, Ratsumukana-honome-no-kami, had retired after taking responsibility for the attack on the base, and the soul within her was placed into a new incarnation for a fresh start. But the truth was different. Kashiki-akarukushi-hime’s calm, archaic smile never faltered as she reflected on her happiness.

Pythie Frederica used to think that she wanted to be with magical girls always. Seeing magical girls grow made her so happy, and she dreamed about the birth of her ideal magical girl. For that sake, she wanted to be a great enemy to oppose them. But unfortunately, Pythie Frederica had a limited life span. She couldn’t be with magical girls forever. Being locked up in prison had made her acutely aware of her own mortality. She’d felt keenly that if she died, it was all over, and she wouldn’t be able to see the future of magical girls.

So long as you only lasted one lifetime, it was difficult to escape death. But there were some who escaped death. Those were the Three Sages. By using the system of incarnations, they changed bodies, continuously avoiding the destruction that originally would have visited them.

That was Frederica’s goal. She didn’t want the Magical Kingdom to fall or to be destroyed by someone like Lazuline the First, and for

magical girls to go away. If she were one of the Sages, then she would attain the position to guide the Magical Kingdom away from ruin, and she could continue to watch over magical girls, becoming their wall. There were so many possible benefits.

Sneaking into the weakened Caspar Faction, she controlled the spirit of their original incarnation, Ratsumukana-honome-no-kami, and then after tossing her in prison and erasing her memories, she had enrolled her in a magical-girl school. Making her existence unclear or even questionable made it easier to take her place.

Targeting the ruins under the school building had caused the attack by Lazuline the First—Frederica had chosen this moment to transfer her own soul while she put the soul of an incarnation candidate into her original body, brainwashed her with Pukin's sword, and made her believe that she was the real Frederica. Whether she would live or die after this would be up to her own efforts as the new Frederica.

Kashiki-akarukushi-hime sat on the stool and closed her eyes, posing with her left hand on her waist, her right hand behind her, and her legs together. She imagined a scene with magical girls all lined up, with the attention of all present as she made her debut—and a smile spread over her whole face.







Afterword

It truly has been a long time since we've had a book in the main story. When I checked the afterword of *Magical Girl Raising Project: Black*, I was saying exactly the same thing. This is Asari Endou.

To everyone who has been waiting for so long, I am very sorry. I would be happy if *White* has resolved everyone's desire to read even a little more of *Magical Girl Raising Project*.

And then there's something else that I must apologize for. *Veridian Green*, also called *Red*, which was supposed to come after *White*, will be a little late. I'm very sorry about this. It won't be as long as the wait between *Black* and *White*, so please forgive me.

And so I have begun with one apology after another. This is mainly my fault. And the apologies have yet to end. I believe that those of you who have already read this volume will know this, but here in *White*, Lazuline the First/Old Blue finally makes a legitimate appearance. Her student 0 Lulu shows up along with her, and they do some scheming behind the scenes and other things.

And if we're going to talk about the Lazuline Faction, then blue is the color. After blue magical girls like Lapis Lazuline, Bluebell Candy, Ranyi, Diko Narakunoin, now here comes Old Blue and 0 Lulu, too.

While the schedule was already being pushed back (my fault), I made Marui-no bear the burden of mass-producing blue magical girls, which I'm very sorry for. Lazuline the First and everyone else, thank you.

Doing nothing but apologizing might make readers of this afterword feel rather depressed, so let's go for a bit of a lighter topic. It's been about one year since I've begun my Twitter account, but recently I went viral for the first time. I kept worrying about whether I should advertise or not, since it had nothing to do with

Magical Girl Raising Project; in fact I was talking about another work entirely, so in the end, I didn't advertise *MGRP*. Rather, I couldn't. I was too scared.

Was this actually a lighter topic? I don't even know.

Speaking of social media, when I used to see pictures of food, I would think, *This looks good, but I don't have an appetite*. Lately, I've become more like, *This looks good, okay, let's eat*.

My health, or rather my stomach, is doing really well lately. Up until about ten years ago, I'd get diarrhea over everything, and if I ate anything even slightly oily in the evening, I would feel sick and be unable to sleep, I was tormented by reflux esophagitis, and when I didn't have diarrhea, I would be basically always constipated—there was absolutely nothing good about the state of my stomach. But lately the trio of yogurt, konnyaku jelly, and black oolong tea has made me feel really great, and I've eaten too many potato chips, ice cream, chocolate, pastries, ramen, and youkan, leading me to be the fattest I've ever been.

By the way, the reflux esophagitis is the one thing I still have. I wonder why.

As for who's eating snacks with me, that would be my younger sister—but just the other day, I heard from her that *Magical Girl Raising Project* had come into the library.

"Huh, that's amazing."

"And the whole series, too."

"For real?"

"But they weren't allowed to be loaned out."

"Huh? Why not?"

"I'm not sure, but I figure it was because it was a local collection."

"A local collection... I see..."

Does that mean it's a record of the history of the battle in N City?

The history of *Magical Girl Raising Project* is the history of magical girls. And lots of minor magical girls appear this time around.

I love minor magical girls—even those girls who don't even get a character introduction, never mind getting into local lore. Every

single one of them has a life, a magical-girl life—in other words, a history. They all have their unique traits, their own philosophies, and lives as magical girls—which, if they're not watching out, can take them somewhere they won't come back from.

No, generally speaking, those who if they're not watching out will go somewhere they won't come back from are in the minority among magical girls. But even minor characters who appear in this main story are often of that sort of dangerous profession.

I really hope even the most trivial actions and lines from them, as well as their looks and everything else, gets across that sort of information and fantasy.

This time, the minor magical girl who moved my heart the most was Adelheid's senior, the "baby magical girl who controls a powered suit." She appears hiding her face with a mask, but my editor S-mura asked me the very reasonable question, "Is this magical girl hiding her face? Or is she hiding the face of her humanoid powered suit?" and because of this, I wound up imagining "a baby magical girl hiding the face of her powered suit but with her real face completely exposed," and I kept laughing for about five minutes and wound up cutting off that meeting. I even burst out laughing remembering it now. I laughed the hardest I had in years. I don't know what about it tickled me so much. That's kind of frustrating.

In the end, I settled on both the baby's own face and the powered face being hidden. Even now, every time I remember it, I just can't stop laughing, but well, it was good.

To everyone in the editorial department who has guided me, and to my managing editor, S-mura, who has helped me not only with this book but also with things on Twitter: Thank you very much.

Marui-no, thank you very much for your fantastic illustrations. Myself and Old Blue have caused a lot of work for you, but upon receiving your designs for Old Blue that were so precisely Old Blue, progenitor of the Lazulines, I have bowed my head to the west.

To director Hiroyuki Hashimoto, who made such wonderful comments, thank you very much. It truly is an honor. Please do keep your eyes peeled for what Snow White will see at the end of the story. I will also keep writing until the end.

And to all my readers, sorry for the wait. Thank you very much.

I don't think I will be putting off *Red* as much as this. Please wait for a little while longer.

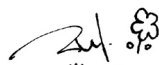
Let us meet again in *Red*, and in the books before it.



I wanted to draw a magical girl with a cutesy and sparkly (?) expression...

Ultimate Frederica is now the most labor-intensive character to illustrate.

Thank you very much!


Marui-no

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